

CULTURAL DISLOCATIONS AND LOSS OF IDENTITY IN BAPSI SIDHWA'S *AN AMERICAN BRAT*

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Abstract:

*This paper focuses on themes of cultural dislocations and loss of identity of the protagonist of Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat* (1993) and her quest for survival in a harsh alien society. *An American Brat* depicts the dilemmas of a Parsee girl, Feroza, who goes to America for higher education and enlightenment. She emerges as a timid and docile girl of Lahore. But as the plot progresses she emerges as a modern girl with her American experience. The textual analysis of Sidhwa reveals the cultural dislocation resulting into the plight of the men and women, and their struggle to find their identity in colonized society.*

Keywords: *Cultural, Identity, Society, Experience, Dilemma, Diaspora.*

In the modern globalized world diaspora is a displaced community from homeland. They are emigrated ethnical group who leave their homeland for affluence and prosperity. They are always in minority in the host country and often struggle to keep their ethnical identity. The basic concepts of Diaspora are their strong love for their homeland and collective ethnical identity and group consciousness. Diaspora is a dispersion of people from their original homeland. Expatriation, extradition, migration and displacement are often used for them. Diaspora fiction depicts the struggle of the migrants to settle and assimilate in the host land. They are always attached to the homelands. They always long for their native land and remain attached to the traditions and customs of their homeland.

Bapsi Sidhwa was born and brought up in United India. In this age of globalisation, it is truly very strenuous to categorise some writers; Sidhwa is one of them. She likes herself to be represented as a Punjabi-Pakistani-Parsee woman. Her novels deal with both the pre- and postcolonial era of the Indian sub-continent. What is most phenomenal about her fiction is her dual perspective which is based on both the Pakistani and the Parsee perspective. She speaks both for the Pakistani's and the marginalised Parsee community. She picks some significant incidents from her own life or from the lives of other people and fleshes them out to create a larger reality of fiction. The fiction of Sidhwa depicts the hopes and aspirations and struggles and displacement of the Diaspora. She focuses on the social problems of the migrants which prompt them to leave their homeland. She knew that her community is facing physical and cultural extinction and has tried to depict the cultural corrosion through her novels. She took up the challenge to record their cultural dilemmas, hence their problems of assimilation and adaptability becomes important in the novels of Sidhwa. She uses the images and symbols drawn from their cultural traditions and customs. No wonder Sidhwa loads her novels with Parsee cultural norms, rituals and values. She has loaded her plots with religious words and images and metaphors. She has made efforts to explore the Parsee psyche in her novels. In her novels, Sidhwa portrays the fears which are haunting the Parsee community. These fears are the product of cultural collision, displacement and marginalization. The Parsee community is suffering from sterility and the loss of ethnic stability.

Sidhwa has witnessed all the brutal scenes of violence after the India-Pakistan partition. She was a Diaspora and moved from Pakistan to America and experienced the subjugation. Her *An American Brat* reflects her personal experience of the partition of Indian subcontinent. Multiculturalism originates from culture which means to develop and cultivate. Culture is one of the most important concepts in social science. The study of society is incomplete without a proper understanding of the culture of that society. *An American Brat* depicts the poignant experiences of a sixteen year old Feroza who visits America for higher education. Her parents live in the orthodox society in Pakistan. They feel concerned about the growth of Feroza who is following and developing the rigid and orthodox mind set. Zareen and Cyrus Ginwalla are shocked to see her conservative attitude. Her mother decides to send her to America for better learning and to shun her growing fanatic attitude. The patriarchal social set up of Pakistan society deeply impacted the behaviour of Feroza who grew into a narrow-minded and orthodox woman. Zareen is worried about her orthodox outlook of life. She decides to send her to USA for a holiday. She is of the opinion that travelling will broaden her outlook. Feroza will be in a position to get rid of her Puritanism. Zareen is really very happy. She starts dreaming the land of rock stars and Hollywood glamour. The main focus of the novel is the cultural challenges, fracture of identity of a Pakistani woman when she leaves her homeland.

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She objected to my sleeveless saree-blouse! Really, this narrow minded attitude touted by General Zia is infecting her, too... Can she wear frocks? No. Women mustn't show their legs, women shouldn't act like that. Girls mustn't play hockey or sign or dance! (10)

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Kishwar Naheed speaks in her poems of the plight of a woman who suffers because of the cultural collision in Pakistani society. Naheed is raising the woman question for the first time in Pakistan through her heart rending poems. Naheed has depicted the plight of women and their sexual oppression as women in Pakistan are subjected to all types of brutalities. Their existence is only in relation to men they do not enjoy any independent status. Pakistani society is rigid and patriarchal giving special treatment to men and giving its harsh treatment to women. Sidhwa has explored the inner tension of women who are victimized by religion and patriarchy and their sufferings are justified in the name of cultural traditions and religion. The cultural clashes are imminent in Pakistan as gender discrimination is the core evil in the society. Men in this society are given respect, dignity but women struggle to earn these qualities. Men are treated as

strong individuals but women are treated as bodies and the objectification of sex is very common.

The novel *An American Brat* is based on the theme of cultural collision. Her interests are vast and she cannot be easily categorized as just a Parsee novelist. Her novels are remarkably different from one another in both subject and treatment. There is a variety of themes in her fiction such as the cultural dislocation, displacement and sexual oppression of women. Her fiction also deals with the theme of marriage, women's problems and patterns of migration. Her treatment of such wide ranging themes is a testimony to her growth as a powerful novelist who is a shrewd observer of human society and a keen teller of stories. She is perhaps Pakistan's the finest English language novelist. There is a complex sprinkling of themes in her novels which defy any simplistic interpretation.

Sidhwa depicts the cultural collision of Feroza in *The American Brat* who struggles to get assimilated in the American culture. The novel is the story of a young woman who journeys through three cultures, her own Parsee culture, Islamic culture and the western culture. Feroza's passage to America, her education in life and her transformation into a mature young woman form the kernel of the novel. *American Brat* is about various cultural conflicts or tensions, between husbands and wives, mothers and daughters, young and old, conservative and progressive, East and West, India and Pakistan, Parsee and Muslim. Sidhwa has produced a remarkable sketch of American society as seen and experienced by modern immigrants. Feroza Ginwalla is the main heroine of the novel. She is a sixteen year old girl belonging to a small prosperous Parsee family of Lahore. She is following the conservative Islamic code, she is deeply inflamed by the Islamic life-style and she does not accept her mother's dress of sleeveless blouse and Saree. The novel deals with the change that Feroza undergoes in the west and how her perspective on life changes. The plot of the novel is focused on the expatriate experiences that bring drastic changes in the outlook and mindset of the people. The novel also deals with the theme of inter-community marriage. However, the plot does not present Feroza as a conventional girl but she has shown her resilience to assimilate in American culture. Postcolonial fiction of Sidhwa addresses the globalization issue in terms of the power relations, which flourish as a legacy of western imperialism. In this process, the most affected are the women who suffer the rupture of placid postcolonial life. The women in the novels of Sidhwa experience the process of alienation and assimilation. *An American Brat* is focused on the issue of the hybrid identities of the women. Interestingly, the novel investigates the concept of the fixed identity, indicating the role of gender discrimination and cultural corrosion.

In *American Brat*, Feroza's multiple identities become the main cause of her traumatic sufferings. The novel gives an insight to American life and makes a comparison between the orthodox society of Pakistan and liberal America life and culture. Feroza maintains a strained relationship with her new environment, fluctuating between adulation and alienation. Feroza is dangerously caught between two cultures. There is a conflict between licentious American versus conservative Parsee. The "extraordinary sexual possibilities" Manek and Feroza "would avail themselves of" (116) threaten to inscribe a different kind of sexual freedom. In "*Rupture as Continuity: Migrant Identity and 'Unsettled Perspective in Bapsi Sidhwa's An American Brat*," Geoffrey Kain, observes that the novel focuses on the sufferings and dilemmas of a post-colonial migrant who feels unsettled till the end of the story:

An American Brat is a tale of continuity. From another perspective, Feroza is almost lost to extended family, to her religion, to modes of traditional behaviour, to native place and culture as she is 'swallowed' by the seductive giant of America. *An American Brat* is a tale of rupture. It is a very American Tale. (244)

Manek teaches Feroza the dignity of labour. The whole family as a unit work to run the house. Time is very precious for all here. Husband and wife work together to run the house. It is very hard to survive in America alone as the cost of living is very high. Feroza's story depicts the poignant experiences of a migrant who becomes a victim of cultural collision. The migrants leave their homeland to escape religious persecution. But it is very hard for them to settle into the alien country. The migrants are confronted with

new challenges and issues. Postcolonial fiction of Sidhwa addresses the globalization issue in terms of the power relations, which flourish as a legacy of western imperialism. In this process, the most affected are the women who suffer the rupture of placid postcolonial life.

The women in the novels of Sidhwa experience the process of alienation and assimilation. She has adopted two cultures and has become the victim of fractured identities. She does not hate Pakistan but she loves American values and sexual liberty. However, being a newcomer, Feroza does feel a sense of dislocation of not belonging, but it is more tolerable because it is shared by thousands of newcomers like her. Feroza feels alienated in America, she suffers cultural dislocation. Sidhwa confirms the fact that the two opposite poles tradition and modernity, because of their mutual opposition and antagonism, cannot make the people live in peace. Her assimilation is false and results in alienation as the cultural interaction fractures her identity.

To conclude, the post-colonial fiction of Sidhwa explores her concern for the subalterns, their philosophy about exile and home, and their themes about homelessness, cultural dislocation and poignant diasporic experiences. The socio-cultural perspective helps to explore the various cross-currents and ethnic pluralities discussed in their post-colonial fiction. Sidhwa probes the problems of the migrants who suffer displacement, dispossession and marginalization.

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