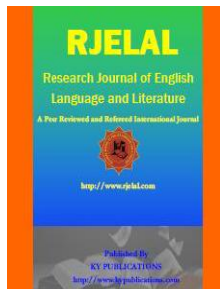




CULTURAL DIVERGENCE IN BAPSI SIDHWA'S 'AN AMERICAN BRAT'

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ABSTRACT

The prime objective of this critique is to highlight the various issues related to cultural divergence that Bapsi Sidhwa has dealt with in her fourth novel *An American Brat*. *An American Brat* contrasts the status of women in the Third World and First World countries through a female character Feroza who migrates from Pakistan to America where she finds herself tempted for an inter-community marriage. An assortment of elements such as diaspora, self assertion, female characterization, migration experience and inter cultural marriage are touched upon. How an individual from the Third world suffers, adjusts and lives in the First World is brought to limelight. The paper also shows the impact of dominating American culture on the values and belief system of people from the Indian Subcontinent. The problem of cultural shock is exposed along with the possible conclusion. The paper evaluates the story of a girl who changes herself from a dependent and shy girl to an independent, self-determining and self confident woman. The conclusion hints at the feminist self affirmation.

Keywords: Diaspora, First & Third World, Cultural Difference, Migration, Feminist

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INTRODUCTION

Bapsi Sidhwa is a renowned Parsee author. Feminist in approach, she is a socially conscious writer. She is a prominent literary figure as well as an active social worker. She has penned down four novels namely; *The Crow Eaters* (1980), *The Pakistani Bride* (1982) also published as *The Bride, Ice-Candy-Man* also known as *Cracking India* (1988) and *An American Brat* (1993). She has been bestowed with many international awards. Her novels have been published in many countries and have been translated into many other languages such as English, French, Russian, etc.

Her last novel 'An American Brat', diasporic in appeal, is set to a certain extent in the Third World and in part in the First World. She has aptly presented and distended her minority community being a citizen of America. The novel dovetails between independence of the First World America

and dependent Third World Pakistan. The female protagonist Feroza belongs to an affluent Parsee family living in Lahore. Due to impact of political environment she tends to be backward. Her mother Zareen sends her to America during the vacation to "Broaden her outlook, get this puritanical rubbish out of her head" (AAB, 14). Thus, Sidhwa handles the existing issue of Islamic fundamentalism in a clever way. Even condemning the conventional custom in either Islamic culture or Zoroastrianism, she never tries to reproach the religion. Her brother Manek introduces her to the American life style. She is disgusted by some awful experiences in America however, she succumbs to American life and chooses to remain there as a student. In the company of her friend Jo, she learns to talk the American way even using Slang. She starts drinking, driving, dancing and also smoking, which is an act of defilement for the Parsees because they worship

fire. Lifting constraints from her independence, she starts flirting with men. Finally she falls in love with a Jewish man David Press. When she tells about her love affair at home, her mother rushes to America to prevent the inter caste marriage. Zareen tries all means, such as bribing David, frightening Feroza, but to no avail. Finally she acts as if she agrees to the marriage. Zareen discloses to David the Parsee wedding ceremonies and traditions. She portrays the contrasts between Parsee and Jewish cultures and drives a wedge in the middle of David and Feroza. These ceremonies and traditions unnerve David. His fascination for Feroza debilitates. He leaves Feroza. In spite of achievement of her main goal, Zareen begins scrutinizing the convention against interfaith marriage. Along these lines, Sidhwa clues at the requirement for change. Zareen moves back to Pakistan but Feroza decides not to go back to the shackles of orthodox culture. She has no love for or interest in her family at Lahore. She gets used to the freedom and facilities available in America. She wants to live and lead her life without any restrictions.

Cultural Difference in Female Portrayal

The issue of cultural shock is taken up in the novel that an individual or any student from the Third World encounters in the nation such as America. Novel starts with the timid and calm *Salwar-Kameez* pure young girl. Toward the end of the novel, she turns out to be a representation of a self-assured and an autonomous young lady who has energy for Justice and freedom and has no hang ups about her independence, sexuality and so on. Pants and shorts have assumed the position of *Salwar-Kameez*. The crux of this novel is the 'cultural divergence' which has been aptly stated by presenting a contrast between Parsee and Jewish culture. The portrayal of Female characters is full of variety with the courageous efforts for the better future. She has contrasted the life style of many a woman in her novel such as Feroza, Zareen, Jo, etc. The main contrast is shown between Feroza of Pakistan and Feroza of America, the orthodox and conservative girl transformed into an American brat. She challenges the male dominating society by deciding to stay in America and marry the man of her choice. The class, sect, religion or community

matters no more to her. Although different, there is some similarity between the women of various classes. One such factor is that only a woman can better realize the predicament of another woman. And it has been presented in the novel that basically women in the Third World are marginalized being relegated to an inferior position in society. The behavior of women is checked. They are not allowed to cross the limits and are regarded as second class citizens: 'For the first time I felt it didn't matter that I was not a Muslim, or that I was a woman. You remember when he told the women in Peshawar to sit with the men? That took guts!' (AAB, 11).

Female behaviour is codified in several ways and efforts are made to diminish their self-assertion and self-actualization. The life style of an ideal woman, who marries and settles in a family, and an independent woman, who lives according to her own standards, is compared and contrasted. She has demonstrated this differentiating picture through Feroza. Because of a great many confinements in Pakistan, she turns into a puritan yet on her arriving to a totally diverse world in America, she gets to be aware of the contrasts between the two social orders. In USA, ladies are working and self-subordinate. Their condition is vastly improved when contrasted with Pakistan. Feroza loves the freedom to exercise her choices. In America, there are no impositions on sexual relationships; even the concept of lesbianism is highlighted. In the truest feminist cultural, heterosexuality is regarded as the part of male dominated constructed system. Heterosexuality is incompatible to women emancipation. The liberty will come after abandoning it and adopting homosexuality. According to this culture, women must redefine the concept of sexuality. This group says sex with men should be avoided; any woman sleeping with a man is collaborating with the enemy (Freedman). The novelist has contrasted intensely the culture of Pakistan and USA regarding the thinking of women. . In Pakistan, women are incriminated against. There is no justice from feminist point of view.

Similarly, in her novel 'The Pakistani Bride', Sidhwa depicts a differentiating picture of the way of life of tribal people and people from the plains.

Ladies in Lahore appreciate more flexibility when contrasted with the tribal ladies. In spite of the fact that ladies in Lahore are additionally abused by men yet their status is superior to the ladies from the slopes. In Lahore, ladies can have some education however ladies from the slopes have no entrance to instruction. They have no privilege to uniformity and opportunity. Along these lines, the author differentiates the position of ladies in different social orders.

Experience of Migration to Alien Culture

The problematic experience of the immigrants from the Third World to the alien culture is also tinted in the novel. The novelist differentiates between the cultures of two countries and explores the impact of America on a newcomer (Dhawan and Kapadia). The novel mirrors the most recent patterns of globalization, the idea of world as a global town and movement of professionals from the Third World to the First World nations. When people shift from one part of the world to another, the boundaries liquefy and the community takes on a new magnitude. In an interview to Naila Hussain, Bapsi Sidhwa says:

The book deals with the subject of 'culture shock' young people from the subcontinent have to contend with when they choose to study abroad. It also delineates the clashes the divergent cultures generate between the families 'back home' and their transformed and transgressing progeny bravely groping their way in the new world (Dhawan and Kapadia).

This is the dexterous delineation of the theme of migration that marks Sidhwa as the diasporic novelist.

Feroza, the protagonist, while moving to America behaves as guided by the family elders but in America she changes herself being influenced by the alien culture. Initially she gets bamboozled by the American life style. But she overcomes her dilemma and drenches herself in colorful lifestyle of the First World. She shows her impatience at the inspection of the custom officer on reaching America. Each and every item of her luggage is inspected and a lot of rude questions are asked to her. She feels frustrated at this callous behavior.

Here the novelist describes the first experience of an immigrant. Later Manek reprimands her for the way she behaved with the custom officer. Feroza gets enchanted by the glorious and glamorous city New York. The incredible city lights, shopping malls, etc. excite her.

Sidhwa has deliberately showcased the different life styles of Americans and the people from the Indian Subcontinent. Manek teaches Feroza how to adapt herself in the new world such as using deodorant. He also shows her the way to misuse the American system. One is the manner by which to get food without paying for it. He advises her to leave a segment uneaten and after that complain about the poor service. Consequently, Manek shows her the best approach to exploit the entire system. Feroza also experiences the dark, dull and drab side of New York full of nastiness and debris. She comes across vulgar advertising, cheap hotels and bars, male prostitutes and stylish transvestites. She is stunned at the poverty, beggars, open drains and filth in America, although it is common in Pakistan. Another facet of the United States, that the visitors from the Indian Subcontinent encounter, is the crime in this advanced country. People visiting the United States for the first time are often warned by friends and acquaintances about how they should behave in the States if they do not wish to be robbed. This type of violence is uncommon in the Third World countries. The novelist describes this type of Feroza's experience as one of the most horrifying ones when she is locked in the fire stairs at YMCA. There she feels as if she were thrown out of New York. She looks at the amassed trash - cigarette butts, food cartoons and smudged plastic sacks. She tries to open the doors of different floors but finds all doors locked. She shouts for help but nobody responds to her shouts. Finally she is released by a Japanese man, who opens the door on hearing her screams. He warns her, "Never do that....Never! You could be murdered....No one would know. All kinds of shitty people....drugs!" (AAB, 94).

America charms her so much that she decides to stay on as a student. After getting admission in a college, she learns Americanism in the company of her roommate Jo. The diffident,

uneasy and old-fashioned Feroza changes into a fearless and self sufficient girl. She stops interrupting conversations and starts valuing time. She also meets Father Fibs who enlightens her about the optimistic nature of Americans. "...When you leave your universities, you will test your wings. You'll fly and fall, fly and fall...It will hurt. You'll be frightened. Don't be. Your wings will become stronger" (AAB, 116). While listening to Father Fibs she becomes aware of the need to cope up with the changing life style of Americans and their culture. Feroza visits Jo's sibling Tom at Denver. She is stunned to see the foster children that have been raised by Tom. This is not so in Pakistan. This demonstrates the differentiation between the two societies.

Conclusion

Feroza experiences changed and better facilities in the advanced society and gets used to them. She adjusts herself to such an extent that there is no going back. She loses her earlier timid self to gains her new self-governing personality. The novelist aesthetically puts forth the sensitive and controversial issues which are often suppressed or neglected by most other writers.

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