



## COLONIAL IDEOLOGUES: A READING OF SIDHWA'S *AN AMERICAN BRAT*

Dr PRIYANKA SINGH

Assistant Professor, Department of Applied Sciences & Humanities  
JMIT, Radaur, Yamunanagar (Haryana)



### ABSTRACT

Identity may be approached with varying notions. If it is seen as a sense of one's own self and its persistence, it is also observed that Identity is in continuous process of formation and deformation and is directly linked to one's contact with the significant other. The attempt of homogenising the nation in the postcolonial era has only perpetuated the colonial ideologies, now in the hands of once colonised, to transform culture and identity for the nationalist projects. The paper seeks to present how the dynamic nature of Identity, closely linked to culture, takes a restrictive turn for women. It is observed that women's function is measured in terms of establishing and maintaining culture. Their identity is, for evident reasons, conflated with that of nation resulting in re-colonising of their minds and bodies. Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat* is taken as illustration to exhibit the escalation of fundamentalist tendencies in Pakistan in the post-independence era that, in an attempt to rediscover, preserve and renew the original national values of the State, tend to re-colonise the psyche of people in general and women in particular. The new socio-political order, as perceptible in Sidhwa's *An American Brat*, projects the damages brought in by colonialism in the post-colonial era.

**Keywords-** Identity, women, colonise, culture

©KY PUBLICATIONS

Identity is proposed as being a sense of one's own self and its persistence. Charles Taylor recognizes "modern identity" as an "emphasis on the inner voice" and capacity for authenticity; that is, the ability to find a way of being that is somehow "true to oneself" (Gutmann 19). On the contrary, another aspect of identity is the presumption of being classified on the basis of caste, nationality, religion, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. Martha Augoustinos puts forth the thought that identity originates from distinguishing the "me" from the "other" (25), thereby, developing two types of identities—personal identity and social identity. Personal identity refers to "characteristics that we

see in ourselves which are strictly individual", for instance a trait of character; and social identity refers to an individual's self-image that "locates an individual in relation to a social category, social position or social status" (Augoustinos 25). Identity, therefore, at individual, social or institutional level is something that we are continuously constructing and negotiating throughout our lives in the course of our interaction with others.

In an attempt to understand how identity is formed or deformed through the course of one's contact with significant others one recognises that the question of identity is crucial for women. Their identity has never been seen as free from culture.

Josselson's statement points at the relation between woman's identity and culture: "I am a woman, but my identity as a woman is my unique way of being a woman in the culture in which I live" (30). Women are seen carrying, nurturing and thereby establishing the culture of a State by means of naturalizing the ideology from the home front. As mothers, women socialize their children and instil in them attitudes and ideas about "sexual division of labour and sexual inequalities, both inside and outside the family and the non-familial world" (Chodrow 3). Once this object is achieved, the larger social structures of society can be comfortably transformed. Culture methodically determines what women are and what they could be.

Since women inculcate in children the culture of society, their role as mother links general society to women's body. Shaheed observes: "At all levels—from the international to the sub-national—contests for political supremacy are accompanied by a battle over culture and meanings that, as a matter of course, include definitions of gender" (347). It becomes obvious that woman's identity is often conflated with that of the nation such that she is reduced to a mere object. Extending the concept of woman-nation correlation, Jayawardena opines: "Women are seen to be the repository of tradition and their 'inviolability' has been a powerful tool of cultural defence against modernization and westernization" (Jayawardena xv). The new nation ideology in South Asia demands purification of society from the ills that the West has transferred. The nationalist project of cleansing its society and culture and forming a distinct identity initiates the process that mediate upon the body of woman which "becomes site upon which various versions of scripture/tradition/law are elaborated and contested" (Mani 115). Ahmed more particularly positions that redefinition of national identity has led post-colonial men of Pakistan to "re-colonize the bodies and minds of their women" (92). The redefinition of a new nation's identity, history and culture, consequently, redefines the identity of women too; and in case of a conservative nation like Pakistan, the ideology surrounding women exhibits national imagery. The portrayal of women in Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat* exemplifies the way they

have been positioned within the cultural parameters.

Human beings have "inescapably plural identities" (Sen xiii) and attributes as nationality, race, religion, community and class form the basis of choosing how they construct identity in particular context and at particular point in time. Such an attempt on the part of the State brings about a crisis, especially for the voiceless. This crisis is implicit when Feroza, in line with the fundamentalists, denounces her mother for wearing short sleeveless blouses. At school, Feroza pretends that she does not know Zareen and later, raises objections against her dressing style: "Mummy, please don't come to school dressed like that" (AB 10). Feroza identifies herself with the social group that her peers belong to and, therefore, tries to censure Zareen's manner of dressing. The idea that the fundamentalists often succeed in entrapping the psychology of Pakistani women from the very beginning of their socialization is clearly underlined. They defend their ideology in the name of religion by laying stress on modesty and piousness. The obsession of the patriarchal world regarding public appearance of women brings to the fore what Jayawardena calls, the "imagined areas of conflict such as women's dress" (xii). Feroza's interaction with her peers in school, where all are Muslims, inclines her towards espousal of the dominant cultural traditions. She falls into the extremities thereby rejecting her mother's manner of dressing and other patterns of social interactions in her home. Her conservative attitude is a positive development as aimed by the fundamentalists to sustain the traditional socio-cultural order. Feroza, on the other hand, wins acceptance of the society by giving up herself to the Muslim norms and, thus, develops a kind of hybrid identity by following her own culture and the culture of the country she lives in, with the latter dominating the former. Her father's concerns and her complete understanding of social norms forbid her from acting in the play. Feroza explains to the young man who tries to convince her to explore her acting talent: "I'm sorry; I don't think I'll be able to act in the play. You know how it is—my father won't like it. Please don't come again. Don't phone, please" (AB 16). The impact of

culture on women's thought and the idea of freedom is apparent. As a subaltern, Feroza tries to accommodate the ideals of dominant culture.

The fundamentalists tend to regard their mission with great seriousness and they abrogate women's rights by means of religious doctrines. M.J. Akbar notes:

There was something in the psyche of the fundamentalists that made them gender chauvinists. Women had to keep their heads covered in public. They were kept away from 'lewd' activities like sports and theatre because that could encourage sexual temptation. (260)

The culture that this kind of religion creates is biased since it denies women the same authority as it accords to men. The biased approach denies women secular political power, burdens them with moral obligations, and thus promotes double standards. Sidhwa's personal experiences and concerns are expressed in Zareen's character and her worries for her daughter. Zareen feels that the new wave of fundamentalism will definitely ruin the personality of her daughter and mar her ability to interact with people of her like in other part of the world. She expresses her worries: "...women shouldn't dress like this, and women shouldn't act like this. Girls mustn't play hockey or sing or dance!...Instead of moving forward, we are moving backward. What I could do in 59 and 60, my daughter can't do in 1978! ..."Our Parsee children in Lahore won't know how to mix with Parsee kids in Karachi or Bombay" (AB 10-11). With such an approach and restrictions the opportunities are limited for women and Zareen's anxiety is obvious who, on the other hand, is unwilling to sacrifice young souls like Feroza on the altar of Puritanism. Zareen expresses her concern for the next generation that is to live in a world that is "becoming more and more backward everyday" (AB 9). Zareen shares her unease with her husband:

She won't even answer the phone anymore! 'What if it's someone I don't know?' . . .

I told her-don't be silly—No one's going to jump out of the phone to bite you! (AB 10)

Zareen's point is obvious that the restraint on social interaction of her daughter is definitely creating an

encumbrance in the development of Feroza's promising personality. Feroza's denial in participating in any interaction with the outside world is not just a mere point of suppressed personality but is more an indicator of a wave that disfigures the social development of girls.

The obsession of patriarchy to fashion an ideal state necessitates that women are essentially pure, both, at mind and body. The laws as the Hadood Ordinances are framed to ensure complete compliance to national imagery and agendas. The inappropriateness of the impractical and biased laws is discussed by the author in *An American Brat* by citing the cases of Famida and Allah Baksh and Safia Bibi. While Famida and Allah Baksh, who desire to marry, are accused of committing adultery or *Zina* and nearly escape death, Safia Bibi's case is more appalling. The victim (Safia Bibi), a blind girl is charged of adultery as she gets pregnant out of the wedlock as a result of rape. Consequently, she is "sentenced to three years of rigorous imprisonment, fifteen lashes, and a fine of a thousand rupees" (AB 236). The laws set by patriarchal manipulators come in for Sidhwa's flak and scorn:

Since it was scarcely possible to produce four male eye-witnesses given the private nature of the crime, the blind girl's testimony against the assailant was not admissible. Being sightless, she was not considered a reliable witness. Since rape could not be proved, she was charged under a subcategory of rape: "fornication outside the sanctity of marriage. (AB 237)

Such laws aim to ensure that the integrity is maintained by women by all means before and after the marriage. Moreover, the inhuman and denigrating new laws that demean the position of women further suggest their unworthiness and reliability as witnesses as suggested by the author as: "The startled women who had enjoyed equal witness status under the previous law realized that their worth had been discounted by fifty percent" (AB 236-37). Treating a woman as half worthy of man is a clear indicator of the dominant group to establish itself as prime and to turn women completely acquiescent.

Sidhwa's *An American Brat* captures Pakistan's socio-political life which is guided by the excessive need to establish its identity and history as an Islamic State and thereby re-colonise the inhabitants of the land. M.J. Akbar has noted this effort of defining identity of the new nation when he records the opinion of Waheed-uz-Zaman: "If we let go the ideology of Islam, we cannot hold together as a nation by any other means" (252). These words reflect over the aspect of identity that points to the way of life damaged by imperialism or colonialism.

Taking this view into consideration, religious fundamentalism may be considered a modern practice by the State to cleanse its society of the supposed ills of Colonial rule that, as it believes, have corrupted its present order. The families, the schools, the media and the religious institutions are the "ideological state apparatuses" (Althusser 162-63) that facilitate relegation of women to a predominantly subordinate and familial subject position. The redefined position of women depends primarily on the conservative-nationalist imageries and the patriarchal ideologies.

#### Works Cited

- Akbar, M.J. *Tinderbox: The Past and Future of Pakistan*. New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2011. Print.
- Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus". *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*. London: New Left Books, 1971.
- Augoustinos, Martha, Iain Walker and Ngaire Donaghue. *Social Cognition: An Integrated Introduction*. London: Sage Publications, 2006. Print.
- Chodrow, N. *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1989. Print.
- Gutmann, Amy, ed. *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994. Print.
- Jayawardena, Kumari, and Malathi de Alwis, eds. *Embodied Violence: Communalising Women's Sexuality in South Asia*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996. Print.
- Josselson, Ruthellen. *Revising Herself: Women's Identity from College to Midlife*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996. Print.

- Mani, Lata. "Contentious Traditions." *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*. Ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989. 81-126. Print.
- Sen, Amartya. Prologue. *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*. New York: Penguin Books, 2007. xiii. Print.
- Shaheed, Farida. "Women's Experience of Identity, Religion and Activism in Pakistan."
- Sidhwa, Bapsi. *An American Brat*. New Delhi : Penguin, 1994. Print.