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Diasporic Study of Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*

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ABSTRACT

The term 'diaspora' literally refers to man's scattering in an alien soil, far away from homeland. It implies a cultural travel, a nostalgic reminiscence of home - the culture of origin and an anchoring in the new world - the culture of adoption. In Bapsi Sidhwa's fiction, there are multiple levels of displacement or 'diaspora'. Displacement or diaspora thus becomes the creative thrust of her fiction in which history is the compelling factor. In *An American Brat* Sidhwa explores the complex conflict between Parsiness, the Pakistani identity and the lure of the western world.

Key words: Diaspora, conflict, minority community, culture, displacement.

Diasporic people are often 'outsider' to the most in the host societies and are also, by definition, 'outsider' in respect of their motherland or ancestral land. In any case they are vulnerable to discrimination and exploitation in the land of their settlement and not infrequently many of them have remained outside the concerns of nation-states of their origin till recently. In Bapsi Sidhwa's fiction, there are multiple levels of displacement or 'diaspora', though within the sub-continent-from central India to Lahore in *The Crow Eaters*, from Lahore to Amritsar in *Ice-Candy-Man*, though for a different creative reason, and from Lahore to New York in *An American Brat*. Displacement or diaspora thus becomes the creative thrust of her fiction in which history is the compelling factor. As in all diasporic fiction, the reason for displacement is mostly economic, which results afterwards in

'alienation' and the following quest for 'integration' at some level 'individually' and within the Parsee minuscule community at large.

Sidhwa effectively portrays the Parsee paradox of showing their allegiance to the national movement or to the British Raj. Initially the Parsees remain non-committal towards the flux in which various communities are involved. The Parsee Zoroastrians are famed for being a very adaptable minority community. They always maintained a strong sense of group identity and cohesiveness which is very often realized in the novel. The Parsees are apprehensive about their status and security after independence. (Mangayarkarasi)

In *An American Brat* Sidhwa explores the complex conflict between Parsiness, the Pakistani identity and the lure of the western world. The

Parsee girl, Feroza, is a student of matric at the Convent of the Sacred Heart. One day, when she objects to her mother's sleeveless sari-blouse and tells her not to visit her school dressed like that. Zareen really gets worried about her. Cyrus, Feroza's father, asks his wife about the strategy she has in mind to counteract their daughter's narrow – mindedness and backwardness. Zareen says that Feroza should be packed – off to America for a short holiday. There her brother, Manek, a graduate student at MIT, will take care of Feroza.

Since Ginwalla family is a Parsee family, their lifestyle is totally different from that of majority Muslims in Pakistan. Parsee community is a minority community and besides Diasporic. Zareen laments the change in Feroza because she could see the extinction of their culture. Feroza is caught between conservatism, which is the result of the rising wave of fundamentalism in Pakistan and progressive liberalism for which her mother Zareen stands. The Parsees of Lahore in 1945 were different: more confident of their own place, identity, and religious mores than those in the Lahore of Zia-ul-Haq forty years later. (Tyabji) It is this difference in culture that Zareen feels like 'outsider' in her own country and so, she feels the necessity of 'the mind – broadening and character – building' of her daughter, by sending her to America. At the very beginning of the novel Parsiness is perceived to be closer to Western values than to those prevalent in Pakistan.

The moment she steps into the lounge at Kennedy Airport, it was her willing diaspora from conservative Pakistan to liberal America. She is triumphant and glowing. She is dazzled by the orderly traffic of rushing people, the bright lights and warmed air, the extraordinary cleanliness and sheen on floors and warmed air, the extraordinary cleanliness, and the audacious immensity of the glass-and- steel enclosed spaces. Feroza is subjected to a rather inhumane treatment by the custom officials. For the first time she realizes that she is in a strange country amidst strangers. The officer tells her that she must go for secondary inspection before collecting her luggage. Eventually, Feroza succumbs to America's charms and decides to stay as a student. She enrolls in a

small and strictly supervised Mormon College in Twin Falls, Idaho. Manek feels that the junior college and the size of the city will ease Feroza's assimilation into the American way of life. He writes a long letter addressed jointly to Khutlibai, Zareen and Cyrus. Feroza's parents permit her to study in America.

Equipped with worldly wisdom, Feroza joins her college in Twin Falls. Manek stays with her for three days. After Manek's departure, Jo takes charge of Feroza's life. Under the influence of her American roommate Jo, Feroza completely adapts an American lifestyle. She acts, talks and dresses like an American girl. The shy and conservative Feroza turns into a confident and self - assertive girl. She learns to drive, drink, dance and use the American slang. Jo makes improvement in Feroza's pronunciation and teaches her to say 'mayonnaise' as 'may-nayze' and 'mother-fucker' as 'moth-fuka'. She makes Feroza practice saying, "Gimme a lemonade, Gomme soda" and cures of her saying, "May I have this – may I have that?" (pg.154). Feroza soon learns to use expletives like 'shit', 'asshole' and 'douchebag'. Next, Jo makes Feroza give up wearing her Pakistani outfit and outrageously dangling earrings. Feroza now wears jeans, T – shirts, sweaters and blouses. Jo wants her to wear skirts but Feroza tells her, "It's not decent to show Your legs in Pakistan". (151)

Jo picks up strange young men from stores, restaurants, movie theatres, construction sites and sometimes brings them to her room. While Jo flirts with boys, Feroza feels very awkward because back in Pakistan, even talking with a boy was prohibited. Jo initiates her to drink and also socializes her with boys. Soon, Feroza learns to have two glasses of wine and started enjoying the company of boys. Sometimes, Feroza felt guilty and thought that what will her family say if they come to know about her conduct. But then she takes it as her assimilation into the American way of life. And one evening Feroza commits the cardinal sin of smoking. At night she searches out her *Kusti* and her *Sudra*. After performing the prayers, she begs pardon for desecrating the fire-the symbol of *Ahura Mazda*.

In America Feroza feels that she is free to do anything. So, she starts working in a bar close to the campus. Feroza's roommate Jo abandons her hotel management course and leaves the apartment to live with her boyfriend, Bill. So, Feroza moves in with Rhonda and Gwen, one white, the other black, and both of them strikingly beautiful. Gwen had a lover about whom Feroza and Rhonda have heard but they have never seen him. Rhonda enjoys flirting even with less attractive boys. Feroza's relationship with Shashi is more romantic than sexual. They kiss when they are out alone and indulge in light and playful petting, but they did not feel the grand passion of love:

Feroza spends her winter vacation, back, in her country, Pakistan, at Lahore. There she finds that people have forgotten Bhutto and his martyrdom. Secularism has given way to Islamic fundamentalism. Non-Muslim are eyed with suspicion. The Islamic laws are governing the law courts. She was distressed to know that the rape-victims are being punished for adultery while the rapists are escaping. The gender bias is appalling while poverty has gigantically spread like a disease. Feroza finds that she does not fit in a country in which she once fitted so well. The American way of life and the prevailing milieu of Pakistan give her a vivid portrait of disparity between her own motherland and her temporary land.

When her grandmother and mother try to persuade her to get married, she squarely declares that she is not going to settle anywhere without a career as she doesn't want to be at the mercy of her husband. Before she left for America, she realized with a sense of shock that she had outgrown her family's expectations for her. On her return flight to US, when Feroza opens her gift envelopes, she finds that she has received enough money to buy a secondhand car. After consulting her friends, Feroza makes an appointment with David Press to inspect his two-year old Chevette Stick shift.

David, an American Jew, is a tall, blue-eyed handsome guy of twenty-two or twenty-three. Feroza buys his car but loses her heart to him. On the dance floor of the restaurant to which she has

test-driven the car, she feels as if she cannot sustain without David. Now David often visited Feroza and soon they get physically close. She tells Manek and his wife Aban about David. Manek says thoughtfully: "It all seems wonderful now, but marriage is something else; our cultures are very different. Of course, I'm not saying it can't work, but you have to give it time." (263) Manek tries to make Feroza aware regarding the difference of cultures. He is well aware of this fact and so he married a Parsee girl back from Pakistan. He knew that marriage is not a joke and amalgamation of two diametrically different cultures is something unpredictable.

But at this stage Feroza is not ready to accept these facts. She even leaves the apartment, at David's request, and moves in the vacant bedroom in his house. Their relation becomes intimate day by day. She wonders if she was the same girl who lived in Lahore and went to the convent of the Sacred Heart. She realizes that she has turned more western and liberated than her family would like her to be.

Feroza decides to get permission from her parents to marry David and she sends a letter to her mother with a photograph of David. Zareen arranges a family conference and puts forward Feroza's proposal to marry a non – Parsee. 'The discussion over here paves the way for the fear of this diasporic miniscule community regarding transgression and the consequent miseries' 7 (iii). The youngsters inform their parents that times have changed. They urge their uncles and aunts to enlarge their narrow minds and do the community a favour by pressing the old trustees of Zoroastrian Anjuman in Karachi and Bombay to permit mixed marriage as it has become inevitable now. Sidhwa has depicted very loudly the fear of Parsees regarding intercaste marriages which could become the main reason of decline of their miniscule populated community. The elders in the meeting narrate a few cases of transgression and the consequent miseries.

Pervin Powri married a Muslim boy. She had died of hepatitis four years after her marriage. Although she got the disease due to infected blood

transfusion during surgery, but Parsees perceived it as the 'hidden hand of Divine displeasure'. When her body was brought to Karachi to be disposed of in the *dokhma*, she was denied accommodation in Karachi *dokhma* and also the priests refused to perform the last rites. Without the ceremony, the poor soul remains horribly trapped in limbo. Her body was eventually buried in a Muslim graveyard. Roda Kapakia wept when she was not allowed into the room with her grandmother's body since she married a Christian. 'She was made to sit outside on a bench like a leper!' When the youngsters left the room, the elders decided to sort out the problem created by Feroza. It is decided that Zareen should go to USA to prevent Feroza from marrying a Jew. She was instructed to face various situations firmly and use her authority as a mother. They told her, "If you can't knock him out with sugar, Slug him with honey" (272). Cyrus gives her a blank draft for ten thousand dollars and tells her to offer it or part of it to the scoundrel to leave their daughter alone. Zareen was received by Feroza and David at the Denver airport. The next day Zareen broaches the subject of Feroza's marriage by telling her about three marriageable Parsee boys in Lahore and two in Karachi. Feroza praises David's parents but Zareen enquires about his ancestry and family connections. On this Feroza tells her that the Americans will laugh at you, if you go about talking of people's pedigrees. On this Zareen explains that she would be thrown out of the community if she marries outside her faith. Feroza tries to convince her mother to look at things in a different way as the Americans have a different culture. But Zareen reminds her that she belongs to a totally different culture; she can't just toss her heritage away like that and it is in her bones. When Feroza speaks of love, Zareen says that love comes only after being married to a right person. She regrets on her decision of sending Feroza to America: "I should have listened. I should never. Have let you go so far away. Look what it's done to you- you've become an American brat!" (279)

Zareen realizes that Feroza is stubborn from childhood. She must protect her daughter from him by hook or by crook. So, she pretends to give consent to their marriage and tells that she

wants it to be a regular wedding. She describes every minute detail about Parsee wedding rituals and customs to David. He realizes Zareen's offensive is not personal but communal. He defends himself and is compelled to tell elaborately Jewish customs of marriage. His anger shows Zareen that she has succeeded in causing estrangement between him and Feroza. Zareen notices sadness and fear in Feroza's eyes and wonder. It occurs to her that her own loving eye may have cast a malign spell on her daughter. She takes three peppers and holding them in her fist, draws seven circles in the air over Feroza's head and whispering incantations she casts the peppers on the hot griddle placed on the stove. The room is filled with an acrid stench. David cries out: "Oh, God! What are you? A witch or something?" (304)

By this time, he finally understood the cultural differences. It became clear to him that he cannot abridge these differences. Zareen was successful in her mission. David's feelings for Feroza undergo a change. Her exoticism which once attracted him to her now frightens him. He thinks of going out of her life. He gets a job in California and leaves Denver. Zareen rescues her daughter from the Libidinous West. The general hilarity and comic situations in the novel disguise the underlying dilemma of the diasporic Parsees. They feel at home neither in the East nor the West. Though their community has the outstanding feature of understanding and acceptance of both East and West, but the missing fragments of their past vitiates it. Thus, Feroza is caught between the two worlds - the one she had forsaken because it offers no hope and prosperity and other which had failed her despite initial promises. Feroza stays on as a marginal being, unable to discard the old and equally unable to find solace in the chosen land. To conclude, the clash of cultures and the need for adaptation are part of the diasporic experience. With *An American Brat*, Bapsi Sidhwa has made a significant contribution to the literature of the diaspora.

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