

**TRIUMPH OF SELF-IDENTITY AMIDST THE ALIEN CULTURE –
CHALLENGES OF IMMIGRATION IN BAPSI SIDHWA’S
AN AMERICAN BRAT**

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Bapsi Sidhwa, a leading Pakistani novelist, born in Karachi, grew up in Lahore. She is an active social worker and a freelancer. Her interest always lies in woman’s rights, social investigation and immigration. She has written four significant English novels that reflect her personal experience on the issues like Partition, exploitation of women and Diaspora. She is acclaimed by *The Times* as ‘a powerful and dramatic novelist’ and the *New Statesman* has described her as ‘an affectionate and shrewd observer....a born story teller. This paper aims to highlight the trials and tribulations of the immigrant experience in the host culture. It mainly examines the challenges faced by the young and energetic Parsi girl Feroza, heroine of Bapsi sidhwa’s *An American Brat*. Further it focuses on the conflict between Feroza’s home culture and host culture in her experiences with cultural variations and endeavours to triumph over the alien culture.

This paper aims to highlight the trials and tribulations of the immigrant experience in the host culture. It mainly examines the challenges faced by the young and energetic Parsi girl Feroza, heroine of Bapsi sidhwa’s *An American Brat*. Further it focuses on the conflict between Feroza’s home culture and host culture in her experiences with cultural variations and endeavors to triumph over the alien culture.

Each individual is born and educated within a specific culture and an enculturation process takes place meaning that the “individual learns the requirements of the culture in which he or she is steeped. More generally, it is the process by which culture is passed on from one generation to the next. In this sense, enculturation is synonymous with socialization.” (Foll, 2010).

Immigration is the main theme of Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*. She says "the novel deals with the problem of "culture shock" of young people from the subcontinent compete with when they prefer to settle in an alien country.

This novel is set partly in Pakistan and partly in the USA. The time is late seventies. Feroza, the heroine of the novel, has been cautiously brought up in a small but prosperous Parsi community in Lahore. The Islamic fundamentalism is at peak in Pakistan at that time. So Feroza's parents think that it will definitely ruin her attitude and she should be saved from being further influenced by Muslim Government. Zareen Ginwalla, her mother, is completely disturbed and worries that her daughter behaves differently when she stops answering the phone because she thinks "What if it's someone I don't know." This attitude made her mother decide that fundamentalism is affecting her. Her mother is frightened of her daughter's orthodox attitude and outlook and she warns her husband that their daughter is becoming more conventional than ever before.

Her mother is shocked as Feroza opposes coming to her school in modern dress:

I went to bring Feroza from school today. I was chatting with Mother Superior on the veranda – she was out enjoying the Sun – and I had removed my cardigan. Feroza pretended she didn't know me. In the car she said-"Mummy please don't come to school dressed like that."She objected to my sleeveless sariblouse! This narrow-minded attitude touted by General Zia is infecting her, too. I told her: "Look, we're Parsi, everybody knows we dress differently."

When I was her age, I wore frocks and cycled to Kinaird College. And that was in 59 and 60-fifteen years after Partition! Can she wear frocks? No .women must show legs, women shouldn't dress like this, and women shouldn't act like that. Girls mustn't play hockey or sing or dance! If everything corrupts their pious little minds so easily, then the mullahs should wear burqas and stay within the four walls of their houses! (An American Brat 10).

Feroza firmly believes in the special code for women to follow. Zareen admits that things have changed in Pakistan; the claustrophobic atmosphere of Zia's islamization is quite alarming:

Could you imagine Feroza cycling to school now? She'd be a freak! Those goondas would make vulgar noises and bump into her and the mullahs would tell her to cover her head. Instead of moving forward, we are moving backward what I could do in '59 and '60; my daughter can't do in 1978! Our Parsi children in Lahore won't know how to mix with Parsi kids in Karachi or Bombay (An American Brat 11).

For making Feroza shed the effect of fundamentalism, she decides to send her to US for summer vacation with her uncle Manek, an M.I.T student. Cyrus, her father also accepts this suggestion and says: "Travel will broaden her outlook; get this puritanical rubbish out of her head." But they don't realize the outcome and risk of sending Feroza off to USA. It is true that travel will broaden one's mind but it will transform one's self entirely. It is very clear that she will adopt western culture and start living with that after entering USA. This new transformation will challenge her traditional and cultural values.

Feroza is at cloud nine after her USA trip is finalized. She has no words to express how happy she is. She begins dreaming about how amazing America will be!

Feroza slipped under her quilt fully dressed, her eyes wide open, her mind throbbing with elation. She was going to America! She found it difficult to believe. She repeated to herself, I'm going to America, I'm going to America! Until her doubts slowly ebbed and her certainty too, caught the rhythm of her happiness. To the land of glossy magazines, of 'Bewitched' and "Star Trek," of rock-stars and jeans... (An American Brat 27)

Her journey begins with a lot of expectations. She is very much excited when the plane lands at Kennedy Airport.

The individual's status as emigrant turns into a new one, as immigrant, when arriving in the receiving country. The moment of landing means much more than one expects. It's a moment of a radical psychological change. And it hurts. Most of immigrants do not feel the pain in that specific temporal moment of physical landing because of the euphoria of arriving in a new world, of experiencing the wings of a dream. However, it doesn't take too long to feel the pain of this dramatic change. Huge problems start when the day to day life intrudes into euphoria. (Rodica Mariana Niculescu, 2013)

Feroza is dazzled by the orderly traffic of rushing people, the bright lights and warmed air, the extraordinary cleanliness and sheen of floors and furnishings, the audacious immensity of the glass-and – steel enclosed buildings. The first and worst experience of Ferroza with the immigration official irritates her and that makes her to shout at them "She will go back to her Country." The Official is confused when her Passport opens from the wrong end. The official doesn't know unlike English, Urdu is written from right to left and not vice versa. Then they asked her number of unnecessary questions about her visit, stay and uncle Manek. They are not satisfied with her replies and ask her to wait for the second investigation. Ferroza is upset over the inhuman behavior of American Officials. She does not expect this instantaneous terrible impression of a new country she has dreamt of.

Feroza is eager to use the escalator which is common in all small shops in USA. When she struggles to get on, an elderly American couple helps her by taking her luggage and holds her arm to get on and off the escalator. From this incident she feels that kind people are also there to help her. After landing in USA she is a changed person. She is bold enough to stop a man who interferes and tries to insert the dollar to get a cart, she says: "It's my turn." The man is surprised and stops. She requests the man to help her to get a cart: "I don't know how to get this, Can you show me?" (An American Brat 57). The man smiles and helps her. After loading her luggage in the cart, she admires the young American: "How easily he had talked to her, his gestures open, confident. She wished she could have responded to his readiness to be friends, but she was too self-conscious." (An American Brat 58). She knows that this cannot be done in Pakistan. She thinks that she is a free bird to do anything she likes since there is no one here to control her.

When Ferroza feels the new freedom, a woman reminds her that she must go for secondary inspection. Her interrogation starts with a simple question: "Are you a student?" (An American Brat 59) How ever she is very nervous and answers in a husky voice which does not reach the officer who gets irritated and informs her to make a promise: "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." (An American Brat 60) otherwise two thousand dollar fine or five year imprisonment can be imposed on her. Then another official asks her: "How long do you wish to stay in the US?" (An American Brat 60) She answers that "Two or three months" does not satisfy him and he wants her to be more exact. She replies that she is going to stay with her

Uncle Manek, the officer doubts and says that he is not her uncle but her fiancé. Feroza feels very sad and doesn't know how to prove the truth. Tears roll down from her eyes when the officer checks her inner wear and sanitary pads.

The cold blooded officer takes out Feroza's lacy pink nylon nightie and announces: "Ah-ha!... The wedding negligee!" Both immigration officers leer at the nightgown as if it was an incriminating weapon identified at a scene of a crime. They comment "It's no use, you're lying. Here's the evidence". This humiliation arouses Feroza who snatches her dress from the officer and shouts: "To hell with you and your damn country. I'll go back!" (An American Brat 64). Then the officers realize that they exceeded their limits and got the assurance from her uncle Manek that she will return to Pakistan when her visa expires. However, the officer's doubt is very clear that she is not going back to Pakistan after three months; her three-month visit turns into a four-year stay.

Bapsi Sidhwa describes clearly the impressions of a new arrival in America. Adam. L. Penenberg says the novel "An American Brat is a sensitive portrait of how America appears to a new arrival." Bapsi Sidhwa has not only pictured the positive side but also the negative side of the USA. After coming out from the Airport Manek tells Feroza:

You'll love New York. I've planned it so we can spend a week here. Then we'll get back to Cambridge. If I get the time, we'll even go to Disneyland." (An American Brat 66)

Feroza forgets the immigration officer's humiliation as she enjoys the beauty of New York City. The glittering lights of New York City excite Feroza and she shouts in Punjabi: "Vekh! Vekh! Sher-di-batian"(Look, look, the lights of the city.) The Sky scrapers with shimmering glass and steel embankments, huge shopping malls, restaurants mesmerize the new visitor Feroza. When they enjoy lunch at McDonald's, she is wonder struck at the quick services and the quantities of fries, ketchup, and the ice in the coke. She feels the euphoria in a new environment with fresh air and fresh people which she has never experienced in her Home Country Pakistan. This sudden shift from her restricted culture to modern culture is a gift to her.

Feroza's initiation in the U.S.A cannot be complete till she sees the ugly side of New York too. She walks past small dark video parlors, flashing lewd advertising, cheap hotels and bars. Later, Manek directs Feroza's attention to male prostitutes, elegant transvestites – the American – style Hijras – the pimps and miniskirted prostitute. He also tells her about "lookouts, runners and drug dealers." (An American Brat 80) Feroza is shaken to see the Port Authority bus terminal "the infested hub of poverty from which the homeless and the discarded spiraled all over the shadier sidewalks of New York. Ragged and filthy men were spreading scores of flattened card board boxes to sleep on in the bus terminal" (An American Brat 80)

Though she sees the odor of filth, the reek of poverty: sweat, urine, open drains, rotting carrion, vegetables and the other debris in Pakistan, where the smells of New York repel her and she struggles to adjust to the poverty and stench of filth of America.

This was an alien filth, compost reeking of vomit and alcoholic belches, of neglected old age and sickness, of drugged exhalations and the malodorous ferment of other substances she could not decipher. The smells disturbed her psyche; it seemed to her they personified the callous heart of the rich country that allowed such savage neglect to occur. The fetid smell made her want to throw up. She ran out of the building, and, leaning against the wall of the terminal, began to retch." (An American Brat 81)

By seeing all these filthy scenes, she understands that “America is not all Saks and Skyscrapers.” She has another unpleasant experience when she confronts a sex humiliation at the YMCA bathroom.

Edit Villareal suggests that the “coming of age is never easy. Coming of age as a woman is even harder. But coming of age as a female immigrant in a foreign country may be the most difficult to all. For any woman born into societies with restrictive social and political codes, however, immigration may be the only real way to come of age.” Feroza surrenders to alluring USA and plans to stay as a student in a strictly supervised Mormon College in Twin Falls, Idaho. She feels the real happiness and challenges of American College Campus life. She starts adopting American culture and lifestyle with the help of her room-mate Jo. She learns everything from her. She walks talks and dresses like an American girl.

Feroza who is shy and conservative turns a new leaf as a confident and self-assertive girl. She drinks, dances, drives and speaks American slang. In Lahore she is reserved and never opens her mouth with young men but in USA she is an open book and social and especially flirts with Shashi, a handsome Indian guy who is her college-mate. She feels that a new world has opened her eyes and wings to fly independently to enjoy the real life of youth but she does not realize the truth that this sudden change will not last forever in her life.

While she does wonder what her family will think of her, she thinks of this behavior as a form of initiation:

At the same time, she feels that she is being initiated into some esoteric rites that governed the astonishingly independent and unsupervised lives of young people in America. Often as she sat among them, Feroza thought she had taken a phenomenal leap in perceiving the world from a wider, bolder and happier angle. (An American Brat 164)

She even commits the cardinal sin of smoking – to Parsis fire is the symbol of Ahura Mazda and smoking an act of desertion. Later, she falls in love with a Jewish boy, David Press, at Denver and she doesn't care what her parents will think of it. Her independence, self-confidence and a sense of freedom encourage her to do whatever she likes. It is very clear that she is in the clutches of western culture.

Feroza's love for David grows strongly and she feels that life is meaningless without him. Then she discloses her love affair to her parents. They are shocked and her mother Zareen comes to US and advises her daughter not to marry a non-Parsi. Feroza does not accept her mother and says that they are still living in the ancient world. Her mother rages: “I should never have let you go so far away. Look what it's done to you – you have become an American brat.” (An American Brat 279). She says that marrying a non-parsi is a cultural suicide and it is not permitted among their culture and a Parsi girl will be expelled from the Zoroastrian religious community. Here Bapsi Sidhwa depicts the discontent, such ancient traditions that prevail amongst the younger generation of Parsis.

Zareen is attracted by David and she finds him very handsome and regrets that some of the “educated custodians” of her own faith are as narrow as those of others:

“This mindless current of fundamentalism sweeping the world like a plague had spared no religion, not even their microscopic community of 120 thousand.”(An American Brat 305-6).

She realizes the reason of the younger Parsi's opposition to their ancient culture, her partiality for mixed marriages is, as for the Parsee community itself, an existential necessity she muses:

Perhaps the teenagers in Lahore were right. The Zoroastrian Anjumans in Karachi and Bombay should move with the times that were sending them to the New World...The various Anjumans would have to introduce minor reforms if they wished their tiny community to survive.(An American 288)

Zareen is like a cat on a wall whether to accept or reject her daughter's marriage. She comes to US only to stop her daughter's marriage with David. She advises Feroza to forget David and concentrate on her studies. Further Zareen asks "Why she cannot be like the two women who share her apartment. Busy with their studies and they are not bothered with men. Feroza, replies that she cannot be, because they are lesbians.

Zareen's focuses on the difference between the Zoroastrian and Jewish cultures frightens David away from Feroza. When she explains the traditional obligations in the marriage to David, he replies that Jewish marriage is also a big affair as Zoroastrian and tells:

My parents aren't happy about the marriage, either. It's lucky they're Reform Jews, otherwise they'd go into mourning and pretend I was dead. We have Jewish customs, you know. My family will miss my marriage under a canopy by our rabbi. We have a great dinner and there's a table with twenty or thirty different kinds of desserts, cake, and fruit. Then there's dancing until late at night." David stopped to catch his breath and looked furiously at Zareen. "I belong to an old tradition, too. (An American Brat 298)

Zareen uses the tactics of "If you can't knock him out with sugar, slug him with honey". To thwart the marriage she pretends to agree to the marriage but insists on the rituals and ceremonies which she knows will frighten David, a very private and reserved person. He is horrified When Zareen performs a ritual to cast out the spell of the evil eye that she feels afflicts Feroza. Zareen draws seven circles in the air over Feroza's head, all the while whispering a hodge-podge of incantations:

may the mischief of malign and envious eyes leaves you, may the evil in my loving eye leave you, may any magic and ill will across the seven seas be banished. May Ahura Mazda's protection and blessing guard you."(An American Brat 303)

Then she fries Jalapeno peppers until they are burned and throws them on the floor and crushes them with her heel. All this is strong medicine for the Jewish David who cries out, "Oh Godwhat are you? A witch or something?"

Zareen succeeds in her plan. David becomes conscious of the dissimilarities in the two cultures:

He felt inadequate, wondering if he could cope with some of the rituals and behaviour that, despite his tolerant and accepting liberality, seemed bizarre. Stuff his mouth with sweets; break a coconut on his head! And, were he by some gross mischance accepted to the Zoroastrian faith, which fortunately was not permissible, he'd have the singular honour of having

his remains devoured by vultures and crows in a ghastly Tower of Silence
(An American Brat 309)

David leaves Feroza and goes somewhere to settle down with a job. She is alone in her world again, and is heartbroken. “Feroza wept, yearning for the land of poets and ghazals she had left behind, for her friends from the Convent of the Sacred Heart, and for her own broken heart-when it occurred to her that she had thought of everything in the past time.”(An American Brat 311)

In the beginning Feroza mourns for her rejected love but gradually recovers. However, she is firm not to follow her Parsi laws against inter-community marriages. She expresses her conviction towards the end of the novel thus:

There would never be another David ,but there would be other men, and who knew, perhaps someday she might like someone enough to marry him....It wouldn't matter if he was a Parsi or of another faith. She would be surer of him and wouldn't let anyone interfere....As for her religion, no one could take it away from her, and she carried its fire in her heart. (An American Brat 317)

She knows her limits and her choices. She knows that no one could take away her religious beliefs. She is disillusioned by the westernization, the foreignness and the borrowed identity.

She enjoyed her life as a free bird in America and never wanted to lose it. So “there would be no going back for her” (Brat, 317) She decides to stay back in America and not to be bound with her communal beliefs. Though she takes out her Sudra and Kusti, says her prayers invoking Ahura Mazda's blessings and favour and to live a peaceful life as a bird. She loses herself in the alien culture but finally triumphantly asserts that she will cling to her own culture. This living „in-between“ condition is very painful and marginalizing for the Diasporas. There is yearning for “home,” to go back to “the lost origin” and “imaginary homelands” (Rushdie9--21) are created from the fragmentary and partial memories of the homelands. They face cultural dilemma when their cultural practices are mocked at and there is a threat to their ethnic and cultural identity. They stand bewildered and confused, nostalgic and homesick and show resistance also to the discourse of power in various forms. In the following generations these confusions, problems and yearnings become less intense as they get influenced by the culture of that country and also adapt themselves to it (Sujata Rana...22-38). The challenges she has faced in a new culture may be a wound but now she stands on her own and succeeds how to adopt a host culture and how to live alone without any restriction. She finds herself that she struggles with her Parsi communal values and morals and faltering between traditions and modernity. Nevertheless, she does not allow these ambiguities to stop her freedom and growth.

This study illustrates that immigration will never affect one's true cultural values and beliefs, because these things will always ingrained in their self so that it cannot be taken away by the alien culture. Where ever the people migrate and whatever they do they will never forget their homeland and its tradition.

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