

## TRANSITIONAL IDENTITY AND CULTURAL IMMERSION IN BAPSI SIDHWA'S AN AMERICAN BRAT

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### Abstract

*Recurrent and notable voices in modern South Asian women writers' fiction draw our attention and provoke thought; Bapsi Sidhwa is one of them. An essayist, a novelist and a poet Bapsi is an internationally acclaimed literary figure who originally belongs to Pakistan. She has gifted the literature with variety of art forms. She presents herself as a "Punjabi-Parasi-Pakistani". Bapsi Sidhwa, an award-winning writer brings various real issues into the forefront through her writing. Every literature arises from the desire of expressing the social, economical and political situations to unfold the various facets of society. An American Brat by Sidhwa, primarily, dealing with the age-old issue of cultural clash, also presents a very wide divide between the value systems of the East and of the West. Further, it is a work of diasporic writing dealing with displacement. It is presented through the life experiences of a young Parsi girl. In An American Brat, the locale changes and even shifts from Lahore, Pakistan to many cities in America.*

**Key words: society, culture, identity and immersion.**

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**B**apsi Sidhwa is an internationally acclaimed Pakistani writer. She has to her credit four novels, short stories and essays. She is a Parsi by faith living in Pakistan. Her works include: The Crow Eaters (1990), Ice-Candy Man (1988) The Pakistani Bride (1990) An American Brat (1993) and a collection of short stories. She is well known for her novels. The Ice-Candy Man, which chronicles the partition. The Crow Eaters narrates the Parsi life and ways, and can be considered as a Parsi saga. Her art of storytelling is marvelous. Bapsi Sidhwa is a prominent writer of diaspora of Pakistan. Her major works reflect her personal experience of the Partition of Indian subcontinent, abuse against women, immigration to the US, membership in the Parsi or Zoroastrian community, and other such related issues and concerns. She has also been trying to bring them into public discussion on a global platform.

The world has shrunk into a global village. Borders are no more visible. Resultantly the literature of the world has also been dealing with the global issues. Further, migrations have made things even more complicated. It has almost become impossible to categorize the authors with reference to the time of their literature, caste, creed and place. Almost all postcolonial writers belong to this "cannot be categorized" category. Bapsi Sidhwa is also one such author. Though she belongs to India, Pakistan, and US, she likes to be called Punjabi-Pakistani-Parsi woman. In her view, expression of life incidents is like Aristotelian cathartic relief. Bapsi Sidhwa is a prominent writer of diaspora of Pakistan. Her major works reflect her personal experience of the Partition of Indian subcontinent, abuse against women, immigration to the US, membership in the Parsi or Zoroastrian community, and other such related issues and concerns. She has also been trying to bring them into public discussion on a global platform.

Quite in her young age, Sidhwa eye-witnessed the Partition of 1947, wherein it is said that during the largest and perhaps the most terrible population exchange, seven million Muslims and five million Hindus were uprooted. The Partition was nothing but a foolish act resultant of sociopolitical factors supported by provoked religious feelings of people at the end of colonial rule in India. However Sidhwa has a different perspective, a perspective with religious difference and distance as she belongs to the Parsi/ Zoroastrian community.

The Parsis in India and Pakistan are descendants of Iranian - Zoroastrians who sought refuge on the western coast while escaping a religious butchering from Arab invaders in 7th

century AD. The word Parsi means native of Pars or Fars, an ancient province now in Southern Iran who are followers of Zarathustra. The word Zoroastrianism is etymologically derived from the word Zoroaster. Zarathustra is considered to be the founder of their religion by his followers. It is said that he lived in pre-historic period. Their sacred text is called Avesta. It is believed that it was shared by Ahura Mazda to Zarathustra, though there are also beliefs that Avesta is a combination of texts of oral tradition that was passed from generation to generation and was written during Sasanian period.

There is an interesting story of the arrival of the Parsis in India. Zoroastrians lived in Persia what is now called Iran. Their country was conquered by Muslim Arabs and more than a thousand years back, Parsis were persecuted in their homeland. Those of Zoroastrians who did not accept Muslim domination and wanted to preserve their religion fled away. As religious refugees, they were given shelter in India. First of all, they landed in Diu in Kathiawar somewhere in AD 760. Then for some reasons they moved to Sanjan Coast of Gujarat. It happened because of their distinct religious identity. At the time of their arrival from Iran to India in the 8th century C.E., the Indian prince - Yadav Rana sent Zoroastrian refugees facing Islamic expansion a messenger (Vazir) with a glass of milk. It signified that the Indian people were an integrated and homogenous mixture and it should not be tampered with by them. In response to the message of the Indian prince, the Parsees dropped a lump of sugar in the milk, signifying that they would blend in easily in the Indian society and culture and make it even sweeter. Finally, they were granted a home in India with a condition that they would not eat beef, wear rawhide sandals nor would they involve themselves into the conversion of the Indian masses. More interestingly they kept their promise. They never proselytized nor did they ever enter into Indian politics. They just made all necessary efforts for their survival, growth and tried to preserve their native culture and its traditions. Significantly, they do not allow mixed marriages and may be because of that their population is on all-time decrease.

Since then, Parsees have always held a religiously and politically neutral position in India. This is how the author's heritage gave her an opportunity to witness the Partition of Indian subcontinent from a safer distance and without any prejudiced mindset. In one of her interviews, she opined that the struggle was between the Hindus and the Muslims, and as a Parsee (member of a Zoroastrian sect), she felt she could give a dispassionate account of that huge, momentous struggle. A drive into the history of Zoroastrianism says that its origin goes back to 3000 BCE among the Proto Indo - Iranians. Initially, the community inhabited the South Russian Steppes, the

east of the Volga River. Looking to the cycle of nature and its seasons, they found their divinity in the sky, land, and water. But the struggle awaited them. With the discovery of bronze casting around 2000 BCE, many of the peaceful shepherds had to abandon their flocks and become the warriors.

Zarathustra was born into this sect at about 1500 BCE. He meditated for several years and then conversed with the God, Ahura Mazda, The Lord of Light. Hence, Zoroastrianism is also regarded as one of the earliest monotheistic religions. The Faravahar is considered to be the sacred figure of Zoroastrianism. It symbolizes the journey of a soul through life and eventually getting united with Ahura Mazda. The soul progresses through its life journey on two outreaching wings. Every wing has five layers of feathers. They correlate with five senses, the five Gathas of Zarathustra, and the five Zoroastrian divisions of the day (Gehs). Two curving legs extending from the male profile's ship symbolize the two opposing paths of good and evil each soul must navigate consciously.

Further, like other religions, major tenets of Zoroastrianism surround life, death and marriage. Dakhma-nashini is the only method accepted for disposing of the dead's body by the sect. The corpse is usually placed on a stone Dakhma, which is open to the sky and to the birds of prey. The body enters the food chain as other dead animal or plant do, which once again emphasizes the life cycle of a human soul. Dakhma-nashini also ensures that the water supply will not be contaminated. Similarly, marriage outside the religion and the sect is strictly forbidden to preserve ethnic identity and tradition as it is considered to be conversion. Moreover, their mode of marriage is a kind of mixture of the Hindu and Muslim ones. In fact, they are cultural hybrids as they have adopted the Hindu as well as the Muslim customs. Ethnicity and religion are the same for the Zoroastrians. To save their identity and the religion, they uprooted themselves from their homeland and migrated. However, the migration did not prove to be only for survival and religion, they have contributed to the economy, polity and civic society of India, (Bapsi Sidhwa, 1). In fact, they are an esteemed religious and cultural identity in the societies they live. The essence of Parsi can best be studied through the works of different authors worldwide, be them in India, Pakistan, Canada, USA or England. There are also many who have spent early years of their lives in India, Pakistan or other countries of South Asia and then they have migrated to the western countries. Assimilation study says that the Parsi experience is about their race and religion, values and customs, traditions and rituals, survival and extinction, assimilation and identity, and love and respect. Mahatma Gandhi used to opine that in numbers Parsis are beneath contempt, but in contribution, they are beyond

compare. Presently, the Parsee are 1 million worldwide. They are generally anglicized and well educated. Strain, put on the Parsee community or any community in general due to globalization and resultant connectivity, is addressed in the novel *An American Brat*.

Quite in her young age, Sidhwa eye-witnessed the Partition of 1947, wherein it is said that during the largest and perhaps the most terrible population exchange seven million Muslims and five million Hindus were uprooted. The Partition was nothing but a foolish act resultant Sociopolitical factors supported by provoked religious feelings of people at the end of colonial rule in India. Feroza Gınwalla, a pampered, protected 16-year-old Pakistani girl, is sent to America by her parents, who are alarmed by the fundamentalism overtaking Pakistan and their daughter. Though quite young to her mother Zareen, Feroza carries narrow-mindedness and orthodoxy in her behavior. Worried parents decide to send her to USA for a holiday. They are of the opinion that travelling will broaden her outlook and she will be in a position to get rid of her puritanism. They believe, Travel will broaden her outlook, get this puritanical rubbish out of her head. (140) Cyrus agrees to Zareen's suggestion as he has his doubts that a susceptible girl like Feroza might marry a non-Parsee. Finally, she is sent to America to her maternal uncle Manek who is just 6 years senior to her. Manek is a graduate student at MIT. They expect the girl's rigid thinking will be softened by spending a few months with her uncle, an MIT graduate student, but they end up getting more than they expected. Enthralled with American culture and her newfound freedom, Feroza declares that she will stay there. A bargain is struck, allowing Feroza to attend college with the understanding that she will return home and marry well. As a student in a little western town, Feroza starts to have different ideas about herself, her native country, and America. Her family is horrified when she falls in love and decides to marry a Jewish American. Feroza realizes just how far she has come and wonders how much further she can go. This wonderful coming-of-age novel is incredibly humorous and a really sharp portrait of America as seen from the viewpoint of a young immigrant. An excellent first-hand (fictional) description of the late 1970s teenage immigrant experience from Pakistan to the United States was provided in *An American Brat*. The plot is particularly specific to the perspective of a Parsi Pakistani woman, but it also has clues of other perspectives from Feroza's new friends. Bapsi portrayed Feroza as a passionate and empathetic everywoman at times, and as an abhorrent brat at others, making it difficult to form any kind of lasting (and positive) bond

to her. Because of this, the character portrayal was, at most, mediocre in terms of its relationship to the reader (or at least to me). I didn't particularly like the protagonist, so I found that I was actually sort of pleased when the book ended. It seemed like it was dragging on. This is a heartwarming novel about a young Pakistani girl living with her uncle in NYC, she moves to Utah to attend community college and she learns about American culture through her 'interesting' new roommate. When she returns to Pakistan for a visit, she discovers how different her life is from her life in America. She has learned to accept American society while missing her family, but she still struggles a little bit. All through the novel Sidhwa depicts the story stressing the expatriate experiences that change and shape the attitude and the psyche of the young girl. The novel also deals with quite sensitive issue and societal concern of inter - community marriage more importantly of a Parsi girl. However, the story does not present the girl as a rebellion who goes against the society and the religion to marry a person she loves. Instead, it presents gradual adapting and acceptance of the American culture by the girl though, initially, she gets baffled with it. She, gradually, goes self- confident and individual. Khutlibai, Zareen's mother, becomes enraged upon learning that Zareen and Cyrus are shipping Feroza to America. Zareen convinces her saying that she is going only for 3 to 4 months. She adds:

You'hv no idea how difficult Feroza's been... All this talk about Islam, and how women should dress, and how women should behave, is turning her quite strange.  
(30)

Quite surprisingly, on the other end, Zareen is really very happy. For her going to America is like going to the land of glossy magazines, rock stars and jeans. With the last-minute instructions to keep away from the strangers and not to have anything from them, Feroza leaves for America. She behaves as expected, but the moment she lands onto the Kennedy Airport, she feels the freedom, as if she has been victorious. She is amazed to see the orderly traffic, bright lights and audacity of glass and steel. She had a startling experience with the passport officer, though. That was not the kind of question sequence she had anticipated. It dawns on her for the first time that it was a new land. She also passes through some good experiences. When she meets a moving staircase, an American couple helps her use the down escalator. She is, in fact, escorted by them. Their courtesy

behavior and help make her forget and forgive the passport officer and the experience. Further, she even finds it difficult to get a cart. A young man in the flirtatious way helps her on a request. Finally, she loads her luggage in the cart. This is where, for the first time, she finds stark difference between her people and the Americans. She finds them unselfconscious who are always engulfed in their own issues and concerns. Randhir Pratap Singh writes:

The Americans are unselfconscious. They are busy with their own concerns and they don't stare at girls as people do in Pakistan. (Bapsi Sidhwa, 67)

For her, the experience is no less than that of a prisoner getting free after an imprisonment for about 16 years. She is happy with the taste of freedom which she never had. Sidhwa elaborates it further, she knew no one, and no one knew her! It was a heady feeling to be suddenly so free - for the moment, at least of the thousand constraints that governed her life. (58) Thus, for the first time, in the novel two cultures are put together for comparison. Actual culture clash that Sidhwa wanted to depict starts from here. A conservative girl with backwardness in her thoughts is set free in a country so free and open. However, there is hardly any reference of Pakistani ethos hereinafter. Instead, the Parsi ethos and the American ethos clash. Initially, the American freedom and values win whereas, later, there is quite a lot confused state when the Jewish values and customs peep in. Feroza finds Manek standing just outside the exit, directs the cart towards him and the story goes on as the journey goes on for Feroza. She is stopped by a woman (in black uniform). She asks for her passport and sends her for secondary inspection. Poor ignorant Feroza, falls into the trap of the officers and, by mistake, informs them that her uncle is a student and he also works at two other places in order to earn extra money. Manek is also called and interrogated separately first and then, both are very severely interrogated by the officers, actually, with evil intentions. Manek explains them in all possible ways that she had not come there to marry her fiancé. He emphatically says that he was her uncle and he cannot marry her. However, they kept on harassing them using some of Feroza's undergarments. Feroza, fed up with all that and shouts, -To hell with you and your damn country. I'll go back! They feel ashamed and guilty of crossing their limits. Manek assures

them that Feroza will go back in the stipulated time or once her visa expires and he will also send him a copy of his passport and a letter from his university certifying that he does not work elsewhere. Finally, they are allowed to leave the airport. Their move towards their residence becomes Feroza's initiation in the American culture. She is taught to forget the honor - honor business. At their rented place, she encounters two sex-maniacs and is frightened. He takes her on a tour of New York. First, he takes her to all the good places; shows her the bright face of the city and then shows the darker one. She realizes that America is not a city of dreams and skyscrapers. There is enough of filth which leads to retch.

Gradually, Manek teaches her things - small and big. She learns and experiences things right from the rubbing the deodorant stick to using the elevators. She also has a very dreadful experience. After spending a week's time in New York, Manek and Feroza move to Boston. In order to accommodate Feroza with her, Manek leaves the MIT residence in Cambridge. He shifts to two - storey house with three bedrooms. He shares the same with five other Indian and Pakistani students. He takes her to MIT, Harvard and various different museums. She now feels at home and comfortable with. She even opens up and starts sharing her past experiences without any hesitations. Even in the presence of a friend of Manek -Jamil, she narrates how she kicked an evening - teaser on his vulnerable parts at a cinema in Lahore.

Thus, in a very while, she gets exposed to American culture and she starts enjoying the freedom she gets there. Alongside, she also goes disrespectful and uncourteous. Manek tames her behavior and teaches her mannerism. He concludes that the best way of acculturation would be to enroll her in America on some programs. He writes to different universities and colleges. The best offer is found from a junior college in Twin Falls, Idaho. Liquor, prostitution and all provocative dances are banned there. The size of the city also suits Feroza. Hence, Manek writes a letter to Feroza's family - a joint letter to Khutlibai, Zareen and Cyrus. She is permitted. Before finally sending her for study, Manek teaches her all required things and expected behaviors. He says, it's lucky for you I've taken the knocks and you're reaping the rewards. I'm giving you a crash course. It's the greatest approach to overcome cultural shock. Pampering only prolongs the agony. (144)



Thus, with all the advice given by Manek, Feroza moves to Southern Idaho College. Manek stays with her for three days and then, she lives with an American – Jo. Jo teaches her English in the American way. Along with the language, her dressing also changes. Instead of her Pakistani outfit and earrings, Feroza now wears jeans, t-shirts, sweaters and blouses. Though, she is found to be against skirts. She argues, it's not decent to show your legs in Pakistan. (151) Even though, she is a little rigid, gradually she opens up in America. Jo decides to live on her own in an apartment outside the campus and Feroza also goes with her. She is happy and excited. But she comes to know about Jo that she is fond of boys. She picks them up from various places like restaurant, theatre, construction site, stores and also brings them home. When Feroza feels awkward when Jo would bring boys home, she would get the advice, you aren't used to boys. So, okay -get used to them. (163)

Feroza starts drinking and she also starts enjoying the company of boys. At times, she feels guilty thinking of her family and their reaction to these things, but she would forget it all thinking of her assimilation into American culture and distinct way of life. Sidhwa puts it as, Feroza thought she had taken a phenomenal leap in perceiving the world from a wider, bolder, and happier angle. Above all, she also commits the cardinal sin of smoking. She, at night, hunts out her Kustt and Sudra, performs the holy rituals of Kusti and asks for forgiveness to the holy fire- the traditional Symbol of Ahura Mazda. Meanwhile, in the break, Manek goes back to Lahore to find a suitable Parsi wife for him and Feroza decides to stay with Jo and her family. The family is happy with Manek's decision. They start showing him different girls in different parties and functions they attend. Feroza is taken to Denver on a visit to Jo's brother, Tom. Feroza and Jo make the decision to enroll in Denver University. Soon, they receive letters of acceptance. The letters confirmed that their credits are transferable. The basement apartment they live in is quite near their campus. At Denver, they find a cosmopolitan variety of students – black, Arabic, Hispanic, Irani, Indian and Pakistani. Among them she meets Shashi, an Indian who is her senior by a year in the hotel management course. She enjoys her days with excitement. She engulfs herself into joyous activities.

Meanwhile, her socializing increases her expenses. She thinks of waitressing and takes up a job in a bar near her campus. Bapsi Sidhwa discusses the subject of cultural

divergence and difference, as well as the issues that arise in *An American Brat*. It moves from peripheral issue to the central theme in *An American Brat*. Talking about the theme of the novel to Naila Hussain, Sidhwa informs, -Naturally, the book deals with the subject of the '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 world. She also puts forward a religious argument, -Since the Parsees consider earth, water, and fire holy, they do not bury, drown, or burn polluted corpses. Rather, in these open-roofed circular constructions, people leave the body exposed to the sun and the predatory birds, primarily vultures, as a final act of kindness.

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