

**SIDHWA'S *AN AMERICAN BRAT*: CULTURAL ASSIMILATION  
WITH TRANSITIONAL IDENTITY**

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**Abstract**

*This paper intends to highlight that Diaspora and identity are intertwined in each other and one affects the other. A person in Diaspora constantly struggles to establish himself as a western man and tries hard to be at par with the natives; but repeatedly he is reminded of his dual positions and of his impermanent citizenship. However, they prefer to be associated with their present situations and the feelings of people in Diaspora frequently change, earlier they had a feeling of nostalgia and their position was, 'people in exile'. Now the same Diasporic people are enjoying their new identity and they find it easier to mingle with the people there in the West rather than the citizens of their own homeland. Though this sense of westernization is prevailing and they are assimilating Western culture, yet Diaspora remains as people with dual identity and dual perspectives of life. In this context this paper studies the novel *An American Brat* to find in the character of the protagonist the cultural overlapping, rejection of social taboos and breaking of religious shell in order to create a new and stronger identity.*

**Keywords:** Diaspora, cultural overlapping, globalization, changing perspectives.

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## SIDHWA'S AN AMERICAN BRAT: CULTURAL ASSIMILATION WITH TRANSITIONAL IDENTITY

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The paper highlights the Diaspora from the perspective of globalization. Unlike the earlier days, the present Diaspora is a result of enthusiastic resettlement of people with new mores and their attempt to carve a remarkable place in the world culture. Diaspora and identity are two aspects, which are at times knotted with each other. A person in Diaspora is constantly struggling with a quest for identity; constantly he has to face cultural clash. A diasporic person tries to stick to one identity that is to be known as a western man and persistently tries to prove his westernized self but repeatedly he is reminded of his dual positions and of his transient nationality. They linger between their past and present, as Rushdie wrote in his *Imaginary Homelands*, 'It may be argued that the past is a country, from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity. A person in Diaspora carries his past identity, at the same time his inclination to be known as a modern and westernized man, forces him to come out of it.

The earlier Labour Diaspora was a result of forced circumstances; on the contrary, the Post Modern Diaspora is an attempt to seize the innumerable available opportunities. This migration is accentuated by the shimmering glitters of the Western World and also by the concept of globalization. Unlike the forced labour migration, which compelled the people to subjugate their identity; the post modern diaspora allows them to carry their multi cultural self all the way from east to the west. Though they are at times melancholic about their pasts yet they have been proving a bond between the east and the west, thus strengthening the globalization. There has been developed a new socio, cultural and economic identity. The Diaspora people love to be known as emigrants or foreigners in their homeland, after shunning their old societal taboos, they develop a new self.

However, the feelings of the people in Diaspora are frequently changing, earlier they had a feeling of nostalgia and their position was that of 'populace in exile'. Now the same Diasporic people are enjoying their new identity and they find it easier to blend with the people there in the West rather than the citizens of their native soil. These people have assimilated new culture but can never erase the memories of their past, though these memories are subsided with the passage of time. The same feelings are reflected in Sidhwa's *An American Brat*, it is a story of a teenager Parsi girl, who has been sent to America so that she can have a broad outlook towards life. Gradually she absorbs the western culture and becomes a complete American girl, when the issue of her marriage arises; only then her parents realize a drastic change in her. The cultural overlapping is clearly visible when she rejects her mother's decision of marrying within the community. Zareen, Feroza's mother applauds three eligible Parsi bachelors from Lahore and two from Karachi. This provides Feroza a chance to talk about David (her boy friend) and his family. When Zareen enquires about his ancestry and family relations, Feroza says, '*If you go about talking of people's pedigree, the Americans will laugh at you.*' (*An American Brat*: 277). This difference in outlook and thinking process is prevalent throughout the book.

Feroza settles in America and gradually absorbs its cultural values. It was her mother who wanted to send her to America so that she can have a broad perspective towards life. Again it was her mother who regrets her decision of sending Feroza there. The reason behind her regretting is Feroza's acquaintance with a Jew boy David, whom she (Feroza) wants to marry. This cultural as well as religious clash unveils the inconsistent decisions of Zareen. She belongs to the generation which talks much about the freedom of youngsters but gives none, and when they try to take their rightful part, the society pulls them backward and forces them to subdue to the old and decrepit rules. However Feroza refuses to surrender and gives her life a new direction, she accepts her American identity and decides to remain there.

It becomes easy for emigrants to discard their diasporic identity and go with the culture of their present situation; they hesitate in showing their sub

continental features. The basic reason behind is that, West always considers himself superior and always looks upon the subcontinent as the third world; they still consider the Asians as the under privileged citizens of this world, who can never be considered equal. This tendency is a result of colonisation; though America has never colonised Indian subcontinent yet the ruling nature of the West has created a sense of superiority in them and has segregated them from rest of the world. Western world looks upon the subcontinent as a place, where only subverted people live, they try to find India only on streets, and they still see the dark side of the coin and fail to see the lighter side. Though the selected novel, *An American Brat* deals with Pakistan as the native land of the protagonist yet the discussed circumstances can be seen in the context of the entire subcontinent. This misconception of the West strengthens their sense of superiority and they feel strong. This misinterpretation of India and other countries of the subcontinent by the West is presented by Dhondy in his book *Bombay Duck*, he objects the western tendency to misrepresent India through street-performers, beggars, village dancers as symbols of 'spontaneous culture' for their own entertainment. In one context, a character Tilak tells Ali, '*Tcha, these people are herded like cattle, animals into cages and bring here and flung on the public.*' (*Bombay Duck* 79). It is the typical tendency of the colonizer to look down upon the colonized. As Fanon observes in his book:

At times this Manichaeism goes to its logical conclusion Dehumanizes the native, or to speak plainly, it turns him into an animal. In fact, the terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms. He speaks of the yellow man's reptilian motions, of the stink of the native quarter, of breeding swarms, of foulness, of spawn, of gesticulations. When the settler seeks to describe the native fully in exact terms, he constantly refers to the bestiary. (Fanon 168)

Fanon very aptly points out in *The Wretched of the Earth*, that the association of the subject-race to animals is a part of the coloniser's design. The Diaspora novelists like Anita Desai and Farrukh Dhondy try to resent the sub-human status of the Asian community in England. Dhondy applies a



typical postcolonial writer's strategy to fight with this imperial behaviour. He tries to undermine and break apart this demeanour. The position of a man in Diaspora is of an uprooted man trying to carve out some place for him and clutch to it tightly. Dhondy's protagonist when reaches Poona, his feelings are that of an alien. Though he is born there yet he has the stance of a critical outsider. His protagonist feels, *'My country is a chamber of horrors, I'm only a tourist.'* (Bombay Duck: 276). The cultural clash and changing perspectives force him to prefer his alien identity. He refuses to relate himself with the fellow citizens of his homeland. This situation can be seen with dual perspectives, sometimes it is a compulsion and at other times it is an aspiration. We can feel that Dhondy's protagonist has been compelled by the circumstances to surrender his native identity and adapt with the new land because he failed everywhere and in most of the situations of his life. On the other hand, for Feroza it is an effort to break the feeble religious and cultural taboos. She prefers to remain American rather than to go back and tie herself up with the same chains, which she had loosen with exertion.

This cultural overlapping transforms her from a timid and introvert girl into a confident and outspoken one. This cultural overlapping adds a new facet in her life and personality; she feels free with strange boys as well as graduates to two glasses of wine. Her life in America is very thrilling and enthusiastic, rather than in Pakistan; there she could never imagine a girl waitressing in a restaurant, all the men around would have stared at the girl, as if she is an alien or committing a crime. In America, no one has time to notice others. Moreover, there is no gender discrimination, this sensation enthralls her and she feels proud to be a part of such a broad-minded society. Neither could she think of living all alone in Pakistan. Yet sometimes she feels guilty and wonders what her parents and relatives would say of her, if they come to know about all this. However, she justifies it as her absorption into the American culture. She considers it as, *'a phenomenal leap in perceiving the world from a wider, bolder and happier angle'*. (163-164).

Another reason for the acceptance and adaptation of west as their first identity is, the freedom provided by it. The efforts that a person does there are

appreciated and acknowledged whereas in the east same endeavours are neglected and at times suppressed also. Though Feroza enjoys her freedom yet she regrets her behaviour, subconsciously her sub continental identity tries to get visible; however she succeeds in hiding it.

This nonchalant attitude of Feroza earlier seems as her attempt to fit in a new culture, the problem arises when she finds that she no longer is a Pakistani at heart. She loves everything in a western way. When she reaches back to her own country, all the expectations of her family members make her realize this culture swapping. She feels that she is a misfit in the country in which she fitted so well. Feroza's grandmother and mother are happy as well as astonished at her confidence and boldness. On the subject of marriage she says, *'I refuse to die as an old maid.'*(240). Feroza feels uncomfortable in marrying outside America and her family finds it hard to allow her to marry outside their religion. However by the end of the novel, Zareen succeeds in breaking Feroza's relation with David and saving her daughter from committing the sin of marrying outside their religion. Though Feroza fails to find her love as her life partner yet she resolves to stay there in America and prefers her western identity over her sub continental identity. Marriage is a point which easily and most effectively reveals this cultural exchange, but it can never be seen as the only ground for preferring the west over the east.

There are some more reasons also, which are responsible for Diaspora and transitional identity. The easy going life over the panic stricken life is always preferred. This easy going life is always available there in the West. An immigrant, on visiting his homeland prefers to be seen as a foreigner, he dislikes becoming a part of the combat zone. This cultural shock is the reason why Feroza prefers to stay in America than to come back and cover herself under the shroud of her old identity.

Feroza's mental turmoil presents the predicament of multicultural society. She represents the expatriate youngsters, striving hard to smack a balance between modernity and tradition, present and past, dependence and freedom. She belongs to the generation, which gains freedom at the cost of

culture, tradition and even family. Though Feroza loses trust of her family yet she gains the positive aspect of her identity. Only lamentation and a sense of loss should not be associated with Diaspora, but there should be a new aspect added, that is global assimilation of cultures. In present day the Diaspora has emerged in a new way having two distinct features. First the people in Diaspora play a considerable role in the world economy; second, they are earning name and fame to their birth land thus building a bridge between the east and west. The relocation of the skilled people from the developing countries towards the developed ones creates more opportunities; thus viewing the Diaspora only through the looking glass of transmittals and financial flows is to take a myopic view. Not all expatriates bear the yoke of nostalgia but they find success and peace in their new situations also. As Martin Heidegger observes, 'A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins', thus Diaspora is not an end of the past days or past life but it should be seen as a beginning of a new life and new opportunities.

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