

IMMIGRATION AND PEACE IN LITERATURE: A STUDY OF BAPSI SIDWA'S AN AMERICAN BRAT

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Abstract

Literature is a powerful tool in manifesting the societal framework. It is a reflection of life. Among all the other forms, fiction is the most vital form of literature which reflects and signifies the social conditions and values. Bapsi Sidhwa is one among the contemporary novelists from Pakistan, who is well aware of the changes that occur in society. She belongs to the group of creative women writers who depict about determined women and their importance in the modern era. She also ascertains that the traditional role for women is inadequate, and women who wish to affirm their independence and autonomy are perfectly capable of assuming new roles and responsibilities. These writers wish to build a world which is free of dominance and hierarchy, a world that rests on the principles of justice and equality and is truly human. In this novel "An American Brat", the writer has brought out the life of Feroza, a Pakistani protagonist in Parsi community, and her transformation of character during the process of immigration. Although the sense of immigration to America is more difficult to Feroza, it is tolerable because it is shared by thousands of expatriates like her. But the austerity of Islamic law at home crushes her freedom. Life is very bleak and gloomy for her. Therefore Feroza undertakes a journey from tradition – bound culture into an alien culture in an effort to adapt and assimilate independence, strength, and decision-making which is declined to her in her own culture. She is relieved from the traditional dominance of Parsi community by moving to America. The New World promises Feroza freedom and abundant happiness. The novel ends with Feroza becoming in her mother's words an 'American brat'. Here, the novelist depicts about the plight of women, how they wish to be freed from age old practices and to live a peaceful independent life. Thus the paper focuses on how literature assures and paves way for an immigrant towards peace and independence.

Keywords: *Immigration, Community, tradition, culture, Transformation of character, Independence, freedom, mental peace, assimilation, modernisation.*

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Bapsi Sidhwa is one of the most prominent Pakistani-English novelists writing today. She belongs to the Parsi community, a religious and ethnic minority in Pakistan. Sidhwa is considered as a feminist postcolonial Asian author whose novels include *The Crow Eaters* (1978), *The Bride* (1981), *Ice-Candy-Man*(1991), and *An American Brat*(1993). Her novels deal with Indian and Pakistani history, politics, and culture. Her recurring themes include human relationships and betrayals, immigration, and cultural hybridity. Sidhwa's novels primarily focus on Parsi families and the Parsi community in the city of Lahore and Pakistan.

In "An American Brat", Sidhwa highlights the inter-community marriage between a Parsi and a non-Parsi. It is a story of a young Parsi girl's Americanization, which is based on Sidhwa's own experience when she migrated to modernized society America from conservative Pakistan society.

Equality of Men and Women:

The novelist emphasises the importance of equality and liberty of women through the protagonist Feroza. Any woman should not be restricted or bounded with the traditional customs. She claims that internal peace, freedom, and independence are essential for any human being in this world. Bapsi Sidhwa is raising her voice as a protest against the age-old customs and traditions which hampers the liberty of woman and which is responsible for the predicament of women existing in the Indian sub-continent and especially in Pakistan. She declares that we have marched into the new century so it is relevant that women should get equal status and not be considered inferior anymore but should be considered equivalent to men. What is right for a man should also be considered right for woman. In this novel, Feroza is portrayed as a young girl who wishes to live an independent and liberal life which is free from all the religious customs.

Feroza's conservative nature:

The novel "An American Brat" begins with the rumination of Feroza's parents. The heroine of the novel Feroza, a sixteen year old girl was brought up in a small prosperous Parsi family in Lahore. Her parents are not happy about Feroza who is following the conservative Islamic code. At first, she is deeply affected by the Islamic life-style and she does not accept her mother's dress of sleeveless blouse and saree. The parents unable to bear the tradition bound conservative way of living by Feroza, decides to send her to America to change her outlook and expose her to the western world. "Travel will broaden her outlook, get this puritanical rubbish out of her head" (14). The family thought that she will be looked after by her maternal uncle Manek. But Cyrus, Feroza's father accepts it because he knows that Feroza is very timid and may not dare even to talk with males. Zareen, Feroza's mother is so confident that she will be very safe in America as she would be under the care of her uncle Manek. Nevertheless, Zareen's mother opposes the idea of sending Feroza to America. She believes that the foreign air itself will spoil the granddaughter. Thus the notion of immigration differs from generation to generation. But Zareen was obstinate about her decision.

Initial bewilderment of Feroza in America:

Finally Feroza is sent to America. She has the tinge of separating her relatives, friends and her country. Throughout her journey, Feroza behaves as instructed by the elders but as soon as she reaches America she becomes a changed person. As the plane lands at Kennedy Airport, Feroza is triumphant and glowing. She is dazzled by the orderly traffic of rushing people, the bright lights and warmed air, the extraordinary cleanliness and glossy floors and furnishings.

She is initially guided by her maternal uncle Manek. Manek teaches the American lifestyle, shows her different places and looks after her in the tour. Feroza was also stricken with initial bewilderment but she overcame very easily with the help of her uncle and friends. She is also disappointed by the insults and dehumanizing behaviour of the officers at the airport. Feroza senses that America has tested Manek, challenged him, honed him, and developed his personality. Manek informs Feroza about the difficulties in getting acquainted with the life in America. Manek says, "Remember this: If you have to struggle to open something in America, you're doing it wrong. They've made everything easy. That's a free economy works" (140).

Further, he says he is giving her a crash course. It's the best way to get over culture shock. He asks Feroza not to eat with fingers. He says, "It's all very nice, and cozy to be 'ethnic' when we're together, but those people won't find it 'ethnic', they'll just puke"(145).

The novelist tries to bring difference in the mind set of third world people and first world. She says that the First world people are time conscious and they are achievers. They find no time to poke their nose at other's shoes. At the same time they never waste their time in ceremonies and following traditional rites. This attitude of the First world attracts the immigrants and compels them to settle there permanently. This concept is well understood in the words of Manek who trains Feroza.

Manek has withered the fear of culture shock which the new world has cast upon her. He wants Feroza to adapt to the progressive and stimulating culture of the U.S.A. He wants Feroza to become self-sufficient and independent. Feroza succumbs to America's charms and decides to stay on as a student in a college. She finds the joy and freedom of American life. Under the influence of her roommate Jo, she adapts American life style. She talks, dresses and acts like an American. The conservative, shy and stubborn Feroza has been transformed into a confident and self-assertive girl under the American environment. She joins hotel management course at the University of Denver and there she flirts with an Indian student Shashi. Later on she falls in love with a handsome young American Jew David Press. Thus flirting with a guy and loving somebody is something forbidden and out of her custom. But Feroza becomes least bothered about her family, custom and tradition. Feroza becomes "modern" in the truest sense of the world. This shows the adaptive tendency of the young generation.

The concept of transformation:

Now starts another aspect of Feroza's expatriate experience. Feroza begins to assimilate the independence of mind and spirit and sturdy self-confidence offered by the New World which is alien to her Third World experience and sheltered upbringing. This is the freedom most of the immigrants like in spite of their deprivation of homeland. Feroza even visits Jo's family at Boulder and continues to widen her horizons. Ironically Feroza outgrows her initial mentors, uncle Manek and friend Jo. One late evening Feroza takes a few puffs from a cigarette, which is against her religion to smoke. To make progress and for better study environment she shifts to

the University of Denver. The University of Denver is cosmopolitan. Feroza thinks that it is the right place that her life would develop in unexpected and substantial ways. Now she is in the vicinity of cosmopolitan variety of students-black, Hispanic, Arabic, Irani, Pakistani and Indian. Feroza's quest for assimilation continues and she moves into an apartment with Rhonda and Gwen, one white and the other black and both are beautiful. Initially Feroza feels shy when Jo used to change her clothes in front of her. Feroza has been living for more than two years now in America and she understood the relationship between men and women in America. Feroza is portrayed as the typical girl of sub-continent initially shy, conservative and tradition-bound.

Though both cultures are entirely different, Feroza, at first very shy at her homeland, is soon attracted by the modernized western culture. She learns to drive, drink and dance, use a more direct and less polite form of language. (Asia Pacific Journal, 18)

In the conservative society at Lahore, she was hesitant to talk to young men, but in the modernized America, she flirts with Shashi an Indian student at the University of Denver. They kiss and indulge in the mild petting when they are alone. This act is entirely different from the culture she had been brought up which has got restrictions in moving with the male society. Feroza, exposed to new life style of modern America, develops love-affair with an American Jew, David. She gradually exposes herself to varied experiences of life in the new world. Thus, Feroza evolves from innocent, conservative and protected life in Lahore to the experiences of independent spirit and self-confidence of modern American world.

Thus, even after knowing the ardent rules of the Parsee community, she was very obstinate about her love with David. Zareen flies to America to dissuade Feroza from marrying the American Jew, David. The novelist discusses in detail the unfair and unjust codes of marriage for the Parsi women. Zareen too feels that the conservative Parsi community must move with the time and permit equal rights to the women who marry outside the community. At the same time, she does not disapprove totally her communal customs.

Zareen tries to explain to Feroza that by marrying David she would be cut off from her family and religion and she would not be able to follow the rituals of her Parsi community. She says that Parsi men can marry outside the faith and still remain Parsi and bring their children up in their faith. However, Parsi women who marry non-Parsis -"nons" as they are termed -are

excommunicated. Zareen suggests to Feroza that she should forget about men and concentrate on her studies:

Why can't she be like the two women who share her apartment? Busy with their studies, says Zareen, they are not bothered with men. No, says Feroza, because they are lesbians. Zareen does not understand. She has come across the word in magazines, but has never heard it used. Feroza explains that the two are lovers. Zareen is surprised. Why? They are pretty, and there is no dearth of men around. (29)

Thus, Sidhwa introduces lesbianism, a subject that sub-continent girls do not dare to involve and even talk about. In contrast to this, in the modern world of America people give less importance to such things. Zareen was appalled at the reply of Feroza. She understands well that it is a rotten city which has no space for tradition, culture and customs. When Feroza refuses Zareen's argument to marry a Parsee, Zareen says angrily: "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 is assured that it would be a futile task to convince a spoiled child not to marry a Non-Parsee, so she plays a new trick. She frightens David away from Feroza by emphasizing the cultural difference between the Zoroastrian and the Jewish. To which Davis argues: "I belong to an old tradition, too" (298). Zareen pretends to agree to the marriage but emphasizes on the rituals and ceremonies of Parsees' to be followed to which David disagrees. Zareen succeeds in her mission and David leaves Feroza and moves to Denver.

Though Feroza breaks up with David, Sidhwa says that Feroza is a changed girl, very different from the one that had left Pakistan. Though initially depressed and saddened at her change of fortune, Feroza feels that it is not however, just the material comforts that seduce newcomers to the United States, but the freedom that Americans take as their right. Finally, Feroza resolves that she will not settle without a career and would not let others interpret in matters pertaining to her marriage and she is able to cross the limits prescribed by her conservative society and culture.

At the end Feroza's love affair with David, a Jew, fails because of interference of her mother. Feroza decides to struggle for freedom and self-fulfillment in the USA instead of settling in Lahore with her parents. Sidhwa also mentions that Feroza's short visit to Lahore makes her

feel that she is estranged from her own community, relatives and friends. It makes her think that she is missing the freedom and independence of America. It also gives her a strong conviction that she has changed, her life, friends, and everything has changed after her stay in America. "Like Manek, she has become used to the seductive entitlements of the First World. Happy Hour, telephones that worked, the surfeit of food, freezers, electricity, and clean and abundant water, the malls, skyscrapers, and highways"(312). She feels relaxed from the orthodox Islamic environment of Pakistan and likes free life style of America where no one indulges in private affairs of anyone. Feroza understands the magical charm of her host country, America. The main character, Feroza, ultimately decides she cannot go back because her spirit requires three things she cannot enjoy in Pakistan, even as a parsi woman: freedom, privacy and physical space (312).

Zareen thinks that the defiance of an immigrant i.e. her daughter's oppose will convert into consent to marry a Parsee boy. But Feroza has experienced freedom in America and she thinks it would not be possible for her to go back to Pakistan now. She decides to live in America and adjust herself well to a different culture and if not David, anyone else may be there for her in America whosoever he is, Parsee or non Parsee.

Assimilation and acculturation:

Today, migration as a global process represents both an opportunity as well as a challenge. People prefer to migrate in search of better economic benefits, lifestyle and opportunities. They seek liberty, happiness and mental peace. The liberty and peace that Feroza gets in the First world make her live in America. It is the freedom, free from all parsi customs and austere tradition that gives her mental peace and happiness. The same theme of liberty in the First world is even brought out by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her novel *Sister of My Heart*. Divakaruni supports the liberal space that is found in the First world. Her protagonist Sudhais sent to America after delivering a girl child, a reason for which she is estranged by her husband and in laws. Sudha and her cousin Anustongly believe that it is safe to be in America where no one questions about their personal life. Similarly, the novel "An American Brat" suggests the theme of Feroza, the protagonist's search for liberty and peace from age old customs and superstitious beliefs. Sidhwa confirms the fact that the traditional customs cannot be blindly followed but a mutual balance between tradition and modernisation is essential and this has been the idea of not only the novelist but the majority of her readers too. Sidhwa emphasises the dire

need of revolution among the young generation and their opposition against the superstitious belief and customs. Sidhwa believes in the popular saying that “All the world is my world, all my humanity is my fraternity”. Thus the paper brings out the concept of Feroza’s transformation in the novel *An American Brat*. It also portrays how women are victims of the society and cultural customs. Sidhwa brings out the theme of importance of women’s liberty and freedom in this novel.

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