

An American Brat: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

An American Brat by Bapsi Sidhwa is a powerful coming-of-age novel that explores cultural conflict, identify crisis and generational differences through the journey of Feroza Ginwalla, a young Parsi girl from Pakistan. As Feroza moves to America, she grapples with the clash between traditional Eastern values and Western liberalism, leading to a profound transformation. Sidhwa critically examines immigrant experiences, feminism and socio-political tensions of the 1970s, making the novel a compelling narrative of self-discovery and cultural negotiation.

Keywords: *Bapsi Sidhwa, Cultural Identity, Feminism, Immigration, East-West Conflict, Coming-of-Age, Diaspora, Parsi Community, Transformation, Generational Gap.*

Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat* chronicles the adventures of a young Pakistani Parsi girl Feroza with an enormously satisfying story and characters. The extended family of Feroza Ginwalla, a lively and temperamental girl, agonizes over the decision to send her to America for a three-month holiday. This act of apparent audacity arises from concern over Feroza's conservative attitudes, which stem from Pakistan's rising tide of fundamentalism. Feroza's mother Zareen is also much worried about the conservative attitude of the girl. She says:

She objected to my sleeveless Sari-blouse! Really, this narrow-minded attitude touted by General Zia is infecting her, too. I told her: 'Look, we're Parsee, everybody knows we dress differently.' "When I was her age, I wore frocks and cycled to Kinnaird College. And that was in '59 and '60 - fifteen years after partition ! Can she wear frocks ? No. Women mustn't show their 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]

The narrow-mindedness of Feroza becomes a problem for her parents - Zareen and Cyrus. She becomes more orthodox than her mother Zareen, though there is a big generation gap. Feroza's mother Zareen is perturbed that her daughter has adopted a Parsi-like orthodoxy in her attitude and outlook, thereby making her a misfit in her community. On the other hand, Cyrus Ginwalla, the father, is worried about another kind of loss of identity. He fears that his susceptible young daughter would fall in love and marry a non Parsi-boy. He thinks that the only solution to this problem is to send Feroza for a holiday to the U.S.A. He thinks that travel will broaden her outlook and get this puritanical rubbish out of her head. Feroza is sent to America for the purpose, An uncle only six years her senior, is her guide, friend and the bane of her existence. Her relationships and adventures shape her alternately hilarious and terrifying perceptions of the United States. Her expatriate experiences are wonderful.

After coming to America, the shy Feroza who at Lahore hesitantly talked to young men, now flirts with Shashi, an Indian Student at the University of Denver, where she studies Hotel Management. Later on she falls in love with an American - David Press who is a Jew. She becomes confident and self-assertive. Her love affair with David Press comes to an end because of her mother Zareen's interference. The novel ends with Feroza becoming in her mother's words an 'American Brat'. She does not meekly return to Lahore for an arranged marriage with one of the three nice Parsi boys chosen for her. The novel thus ends ambivalently. Feroza, despite an estranged love affair with David Press and general feeling of depression, prefers the struggle for freedom and self-fulfillment at the U. S. A. instead of the settled family life at Lahore. At this stage Bapsi Sidhwa stresses the fact that the expatriate experiences go a long way in changing the protagonist's attitudes.

In *An American Brat* Bapsi Sidhwa highlights the sensitive-issue of inter-community marriage between the Parsi and non-Parsi. On the theme of marriage, she maintains a clever balance, implicitly opposing the rigid code but not appearing overtly rebellious.

The theme elaborately examined in *An American Brat* is the controversial issue of prohibition of inter-community marriages among the Parsis. In making this issue the central concern of the narrative, Sidhwa reveals her awareness of an issue that has serious ramifications and consequences for the very existence of the Parsi community. Bapsi Sidhwa has hinted at the problem of inter-community marriages in all her novels. However, the first Parsi novelist to highlight the contentious issue of inter-community marriage is Perin Bharucha in *The Fire Worshipers*. In her novel, Bharucha tries to reject the concept of ethical purity through Nariman, an idealist, who wants to marry outside his community

Nariman's father, Pestonji Kanchawalla, resists disintegration of his community beginning from his own family through the proposed mixed marriage of his son with Portia Roy, a non-Parsi girl. The younger Parsis revolt against such artificial restrictions. Later Parsi novelists also show that the racial rigidity to inter community marriage is gradually getting eroded. Firdaus Kanga in his novel *Trying to Grow* shows that the protagonist Brit's family allows his sister Dolly to marry a Muslim, Salim. Initially, Brit and Dolly's parents resist the marriage as to them, the Muslims are the enemies of their community. When Dolly refuses to change her stand, the parents give their consent.

Bapsi Sidhwa hints at the problem of inter-community marriage in her first novel *The Crow Eaters*. In this novel Yazdi, the second son of the successful businessman Faredoon Junglewalla, is sensitive and aggrieved at the conspicuous commercialism and sycophancy of the Parsis. His father does not allow him to marry Rosy Watson, his childhood Anglo-Indian sweetheart. Bapsi Sidhwa shows through Faredoon's speech the rationale behind the traditional Parsi opposition to any inter-community marriage. Bapsi Sidhwa locates the theme of inter-community marriage in a non-Parsi context in her next novel, *The Pakistani Bride*. The two inter-community marriages depicted are between the white American Carol and the Pakistani Muslim Farrukh and between the girl from the plains Zaitoon and the tribal from the hills, Sakhi. Both Carol and Zaitoon are victimized and the marriage causes them intense agony and unhappiness. The novelist shows that marriage outside the community can be self-damaging thereby seemingly endorsing the traditional Parsi constrain of inter-community marriage.

In *An American Brat* the theme of marriage is examined in detail and in Parsi context. Feroza's horizons widen when she joins a larger university in the Cosmopolitan city of Denver. She moves into an apartment with two American girls and sheds many of her social inhibitions in their company. Her newly acquired confidence and sense of freedom culminates in her falling in love with a Jewish boy, David Press, at Denver. When Feroza announces that she wants to marry David, her family in Pakistan is both agitated and shocked. The mother Zareen flies to Denver to dissuade Feroza from taking a step that would lead her being ex-communicated and expelled from the faith. The parents think that such a marriage would bring shame to the family honour. The family's opposition to Feroza's impending marriage represents the predominant traditionalist view of the Parsi community to such inter-community marriages as these. However, the author depicts the growing discontent with such ancient traditions among the younger generation of Parsis.

Zareen, when she sees David and finds him a suitable match, has doubts about the rigid code. She expresses the author's own uneasiness with the ancient tradition. Zareen begins to understand the logic of the younger Parsis's opposition, she says:

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 Brat*, 288]

Zareen is now trapped in a paradox. She finds David admirable and appealing. Yet she is also aware that such a marriage would deprive her daughter of her faith, heritage, family and community. Zareen recalls the warning from the Athornan Mandal and the notice from the Bombay Zoroastrian Jashan Committee. As a mother she fears that the marriage would be a problematic affair for her daughter. The novelist narrates Zareen's anxieties:

Zareen knew what she must do. However admirable and appealing David was, however natural to the stimulating and carefree environment, he would deprive her daughter of her faith, her heritage, her family, and her community. She would be branded an adulteress and her children pronounced illegitimate. She would be accused of committing the most heinous sacrileges. Cut off from her culture and her surroundings like a fish in shallow waters, her child would eventually shrivel up. And her dread for Feroza altered her opinion of David. [*An American Brat*, 289]

Feroza's affair with David makes her mother restless. Even Feroza and David sense the change in her mood. They realise how fragile their happiness is and how vulnerable they are. Zareen is fully determined to divert Feroza from David at any rate. She uses the tactics of "If you can't knock him out with sugar, slug him with honey," [*An American Brat*, 272] 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. The relationship disintegrates and Zareen's play particularly triumphs. As a Parsi writer, Bapsi Sidhwa does not take a rebellious stance against the dominating ideology of her community. However, Sidhwa is no conformist. She does not endorse the traditional Parsi code on inter-community marriage. Instead, through Zareen and Feroza's reactions, she hints at the need for change. Zareen realizes that by denying her daughter freedom of choice in marriage, she proves to be extremely rigid. Similarly Feroza is heart-broken after David's departure. However she does not compromise and remain firm in her resolve not to submit to the dictates of Parsi laws against inter-community marriages. She expresses her convictions towards the end of the novel thus:

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

Thus, Feroza's stay in America certainly affects her fundamental attitude. She journeys through her own community's Parsi culture, her country, its Islamic culture and the Western culture of America. The orthodoxy of Feroza's community becomes a big hurdle on the path of her opposed marriage to David Press. Indira Bhatt rightly puts it:

Surprisingly the Parsi community that prides itself as westernised and liberated community is in fact not so liberal. Bapsi Sidhwa portrays Parsi community's traditional dictum of double standards - one for the man, another for the woman especially when it is the question of inter-faith marriage. Man's inter-faith marriage is acceptable and his wife of the other faith and their children are accepted into the Parsi fold. But if a woman marries a non-Parsi, she is an outcast and debarred from community and even from their temple-Agiari. The Parsis are fundamentalists to the core and the priests are not prepared to move with the times even when the community is dwindling. To such a community family background belongs Feroza, the protagonist of *An American Brat*. It is this paradoxical situation of social life of the community where women are treated as equals and religious attitude of the elders where women are considered inferior that Bapsi Sidhwa portrays. [Bhatt: 93]

Feroza's conservative mother Zareen ironically realizes that by denying her daughter freedom of choice in marriage, she is doing great injustice to her. David's departure breaks Feroza's heart. She is in a helpless state, as she feels emotionally let down.

As far as the Indian expatriates in the U. S. A. are concerned, they are quite adept in adapting to the new environment and making themselves safe and secure there. The instinct of adaptability is profusely observed in the expatriate Indians. Shashi plays the role of a beggar tactfully to get money in America. Shashi's brother Deepak and his pregnant sister-in-law Mala come to America with a purpose. If the child is born in America, they will have an advantage of the child's American citizenship. Feroza's first experience of the U.S. is her encounter with the immigration official who badgers her and tries to get her to admit that she has come to America to get married and the uncle is not an uncle. At this stage she is so upset that she starts weeping and shouting that she will go back to her own country. Manek, her uncle warns her to be silent and manages to convince the immigration official of their true

relationship assuring him that she would go back to Pakistan the moment her visa expires. Bapsi Sidhwa exposes Feroza to the cruel and harsh realities of life when she lands in America. Feroza is exposed to the ways of the New World for the first time in her life. Bapsi Sidhwa makes Feroza's arrival at New York a little unrealistic only to show to Feroza that the new world is not so simple as her third world country Pakistan.

Bapsi Sidhwa highlights the theme of expatriate experiences in Feroza's initiation to the U.S.A. Her check-up at the customs, incredibility at the lights, museums opulence and shopping at New York have been portrayed imaginatively in the novel. Her innocence as well as ignorance comes to light when she gets lost on the fire stair at the Y.M.C.A., in a museum at Boston and her confusion when confronted by a sex maniac at the Y.M.C.A. bathroom. Her first visit to the first world as a citizen of the third world country exposes her to wonderful things. Novy Kapadia observes:

Creditably during this initial phase of the novel, Sidhwa does not emerge as an apologist for the first world or the USA. She chronicles the glamour and efficiency of the USA but also delineates the seedy and violent aspects of life in a post-industrial, consumerist and technology dominated society. [Kapadia: 189]

Feroza's uncle Manek also exposes her to the other side of New York. He tells her about looks out, runners, drug-dealers, elegant transvestites, male prostitutes and pubs of poverty. Feroza is also shown the port authority bus terminal in New York. Bapsi Sidhwa narrates it:

The interior of the terminal appeared stark in the neon lighting, and from its squalid center sprang a fetid stench that made Feroza reel. She sensed the terminal was 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 and women were spreading scores of flattened cardboard boxes to sleep on in the bus terminal. [*An American Brat*, 80]

Feroza's uncle Manek succeeds in adjusting with the American way of life. He wants his niece Feroza to imbibe the progressive and stimulating culture of the U.S.A. Strangely enough, Manek enjoys the company of liberal women in America but when it comes to marriage, he returns to Lahore and agrees to an arranged marriage. He chooses a simple and straightforward girl, Aban to whom divorce is an ill-omened word. In short, in this novel Bapsi Sidhwa depicts expatriate experiences, cultural clashes and theme of inter-community marriages and their impact on the lives of characters.

Characterization

Bapsi Sidhwa has portrayed some memorable characters like Zarin, Cyrus, Feroza, Manek Aban etc. in *An American Brat*. They play their role in their limited span of life.

Zareen, Feroza's mother, is portrayed as a typical Parsi woman, but at the end of the novel she realises that by denying her daughter freedom of choice in marriage she and the educated custodians of the Zoroastrian doctrine are not less rigid than the Fundos in Pakistan. She plays a major role in separating her daughter Feroza from her lover David. Even before she flies to America from Lahore for the purpose, she is mentally prepared to get the work done by hook or crook. She goes to America with ten thousand dollars in case some bribe is to be given to David for his withdrawal. Her strong will power enables her to set the thing right though it is difficult to separate genuine lovers from each other.

Zareen makes David feel that he and Feroza have been too cavalier and callow in dismissing the dissimilarities in their backgrounds. Her attitude towards him distresses and humiliates him. She even tries to convince her daughter Feroza to change her mind. She says that it is not a matter of Feroza marrying a non-Parsi boy but all her relationships matter as her entire family is involved. She tries to describe how much pleasure the interaction with new Parsi in-laws would bring the family. She is of the opinion that if Feroza marries a Parsi boy, it will lead to "more wedding feasts, more cozy friendships, more bonding within the community and more prestige." [*An American Brat*, 278] She says to Feroza:

"You are robbing us of a dimension of joy we have a right to expect. What will you bring to the family if you marry this David? His family won't get involved with ours. But that doesn't matter so much... What matters is your life- it will be so dry. Just husband, wife, and may be a child rattling like loose stones in this huge America!" [*An American Brat*, 278]

Before she leaves America, she has achieved her goal to bring Feroza's relationship with David to an end. She has to do so as she is a typical Parsi woman who will not allow her daughter to violate the basic norms of Zoroastrianism. Sidhwa explains the reason why she dissuades Feroza to marry David:

Zareen wanted to spin a protective shield of love around her daughter, defend her from accusations of polluting the genetic structure of their race and dirtying the spiritual genes, if there were such things, and the purity of their religion: mighty charges no young girl could withstand, not even if she professed to be irreligious. [*An American Brat*, 306]

Ironically, Zareen wishes that David was Parsi. In fact she finds him suitable for Feroza but the only problem is that he is a Jew. At this stage she becomes Sidhwa's mouthpiece and expresses her own unease with the ancient tradition. She begins to

understand the logic behind the opposition of the young Parsis to the prohibition of interfaith marriages. Sidhwa narrates:

Perhaps the teenagers in Lahore were right. The Zoroastrian *Anjuman* in Karachi and Bombay should move with the times that were sending them to the New World. Bunny's image materialized before her with startling lucidity as her niece tossed her ponytail and said, "For God's sake ! You're carrying on as if Feroza's dead ! She's only getting married."

Of course. And to a nice boy. Zareen was sanguine. The various *Anjumans* would have to introduce minor reforms if they wished their tiny community to survive. [*An American Brat*, 288]

At this stage Zareen is in a fix. Her idea about David begins to change and she finds him admirable and appealing. At the same time she is fully conscious that such a marriage would deprive her daughter of her faith, heritage, family and community. Zarin recalls the warning from the Athoran Mandal and the Notice from the Bombay Zoroastrian Jashan Committee. The notice runs thus:

NOTICE

PLEASE NOTE THAT ACCORDING TO THE PARSEE, ZOROASTRIAN RELIGIOUS BELIEFS, PERCEPTS, TENETS, DOCTRINES, HOLY SCRIPTURES, CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS, ONCE A PARSEE-ZOROASTRIAN MARRIES A NON-ZOROASTRIAN, HE OR SHE IS DEEMED TO HAVE RENOUNCED THE FAITH AND CEASES TO BE A PARSEE-ZOROASTRIAN FAITH FORBID INTERMARRIAGES, AS MIXING PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL GENES IS CONSIDERED A CARDINAL CRIME AGAINST NATURE. HENCE, HE OR SHE DOES NOT HAVE ANY COMMUNAL OR RELIGIOUS RIGHTS OR PRIVILEGES. [*An American Brat*, 305]

The notice shows us the concern of the parents for their children. It in fact becomes a manual of life style for them that include the parents, children and the future generations.

Feroza is a central character in *An American Brat*. At her early days in Pakistan, she grows to be a conservative child. She objects to her mother's way of dressing. She firmly believes that even Parsi women in Lahore should not dress differently. Her father Cyrus is worried about a Muslim boy who visits Feroza to persuade her to play the role in the drama. He thinks that his dear daughter might succumb to the Islamic conservatism one way or the other and forget her own Parsi tradition.

She is sent to America, which changes her so much so that the shy girl does not hesitate to flirt with an Indian student Shashi. She falls in love with David who does not belong to her community. Her mother, Zareen, objects to her affair with a non Parsi boy as it will ultimately lead her to the depravation of her family, faith and everything. She is bold enough to face her mother on this crucial issue, but David finally withdraws because he is unable to resist the traditional Parsi marriage ceremony as proposed by Zareen.

In fact, David also belongs to a traditional Jewish family. Even his parents are not happy with his idea to marry a Parsi girl. He says to Feroza:

"My parents aren't happy about the marriage, either. It's lucky they're Reformed Jews, otherwise they'd go into mourning and pretend I was dead. We have Jewish customs, you know. My family will miss my getting married 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." [*An American Brat*, 298]

Towards the end of the novel we realise that exotic charm that Feroza has evoked in David's mind is gradually fading. Sidhwa has created the character of David to show that in practice, the infusion of two different ancient religions, traditions, and culture namely Zoroastrianism and Judaism is rather difficult.

Cyrus Ginwalla, Feroza's father, is a typical Parsi man. He is orthodox so much so that he takes care in every possible way to see that his daughter Feroza does not mix with any boy. At the same time, he does not wish that his dear daughter should pick up Islamic fundamentalism emerging from Pakistan.

Manek, Feroza's uncle, is portrayed as a true Parsi religious man. He tastes a living and culture of America, though he does not give up his religious faith of marriage. He enjoys the company of liberated women in America but when it comes to marriage, he agrees to an arranged marriage. His stay in America strengthens his idea to marry a docile Parsi girl of Lahore. He comes to Lahore and marries Aban for whom divorce is something that is unimaginable. Such a choice on the part of Manek reflects the typical Parsi psyche and a curious paradoxical attitude towards women. The Western culture does not change him as far as matrimonial affairs are concerned. Sidhwa has succeeded considerably in portraying her male and female characters realistically in all of her novels.

Narrative Technique:

Sidhwa employs the third person narration in *An American Brat*. She also uses irony to expose growing Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan. Her depiction of Feroza's expatriate experiences is remarkable.

Bibilography:

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