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Research Article

## **Analysis of the Cultural Dichotomy and Diasporic Consciousness in Bapsi Sidhwa's Novel "An American Brat"**

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### **Abstract**

Bapsi Sidhwa's Novel "An American Brat" significantly showcases the diasporic identity of women of color and also takes on triple contrast between the struggles of a Parsee women in Islamic state, Islamic women in American land and an immigrant in foreign land. This paper aims at navigating through the evolution of diasporic consciousness in this novel and study the dichotomy in the cultural practices of the two nations of America and Pakistan. Through this paper, we also bring into the limelight, the weight of diasporic double consciousness and the effects it has on the moral compass of an individual. Our paper highlights the closely knit nature of culture and society and showcases how that plays an important role in the evolution of diaspora and diasporic consciousness. In the end, we have made sure to include the parts where both positives and negatives about a new culture can be displayed and have not made the mistake of dabbling with the positives of the new western culture alone, which is often mistakenly swapped with diaspora.

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### **1. Introduction**

Culture is closely linked with the social fabric of a country and is one of the most important parts of the core concept of social sciences including the studies of diasporic consciousness. How a society and an individual grows, is dependent on the culture of that society and any study of the individual behavior would stand incomplete without the study of its culture. "An American Brat" is a poignant description of the experiences of a young girl Feroza who is forcefully made to visit America by her parents during her vacations because they are worried about her rising fanatic tendencies which are influenced by the narrow minded and orthodox society of Pakistan. Pakistani feminist authors are often accused of reciting a similar track of the story over and over again but Sidhwa has broken that wall by including the issues of women of colour in the immigrant community which are hardly ever represented in literature. This story depicts the journey of development of character and culture through various self defense mechanisms and the urge to fit into the new society as a part of her diasporic journey. Bapsi Sidhwa's characters go through a constant change throughout her novel and shown crossing the various juxtapositions in the cultural dimensions of their homeland and host land. Sometimes they are shown struggling to preserve their cultural identities and sometimes they are shown miming the new culture in order to camouflage in the society.

*This paper aims at studying the cultural dichotomy as a part of Diaspora present in Bapsi Sidhwa's Novel "An American Brat" and aims at analyzing the various elements of cultural collision and corrosion by studying and comparing the cultures of the two countries, position of women in the two societies, the structural environment and the contrast between the character's homeland and host land and the linguistic differences that are presented as a part of Diaspora in the story.*

## 2. Theory of Diaspora

Diaspora word has its origin in Greek language where the word stems from a verb "diasperien" which stands for the action of scattering seeds. In general, Diaspora is inclusive of the immigrants from all around the world due to various reasons such as exile, prosperity, finding new identity, employment etc. originally, this term was used to denote the migration of the Jewish community but now it is not longer restricted to the Jewish community alone and is used in literary analysis to depict the cultural and psychological impact of migration to a host land. The people who leave their country in a quest for seeking affluence or prosperity always find themselves in the minority section in the host country and struggle to keep up with their cultural identity. Not only this struggle is towards maintaining their cultural identity, but also includes the building up of the emotions of guilt when the immigrants try to mimic the foreign culture in order to blend in with the community, a guilt very specific to these minorities of immigrant people alone. ***This results in the point of cultural dichotomy and a grappling mental psyche of people who are caught between the two cultures.*** In this novel "An American Brat", the author had not only shown the cultural struggles of an Indian subcontinent native in the first world country, but has also shown the struggles of the Parsee community itself within Pakistan.

Bapsi Sidhwa was a woman native to the united India's city Karachi and had lived to tell the stories of India- Pakistan division and the story of the struggle of her own Parsee community that she had belonged to. Grown up in America, Sidhwa is one of those writers whose ethnicity is impossible to be described in a single word. Sidhwa herself insists on being known as a "Punjabi- Pakistani- Parsee" woman. Her novels represent the plight of both Pakistani community in America and the marginalization of the Parsee community in Pakistan. Regardless, her novel paves a path for hope while accurately depicting the cultural collisions and the valences of the people who live in a foreign land. Being a Diaspora herself, Sidhwa has based her novel "An American Brat" around the hybrid cultural identities of the women of colour and shows the struggle of the characters in chasing their own ideas of fixed identities which is indicative of cultural corrosion and gender discrimination as well. The character Feroza is depicted to don multiple identities which is the root cause of her cultural conflict in America.

## 3. Cultural Dichotomy in the Novel

Cultural differences as part of diasporic evolution are quite eminent in Sidhwa's novel which she has taken ample amount of time and space to express. American cultural and economic diaspora confers ease and comfort of performing everyday tasks like opening a plastic bag or a milk carton that distinguishes the experience of gendered subalterns across borders. "And each time, Manek saw Feroza wrestle with a jar or juice bottle or tamper proof vial, he said, Remember this: If you have to struggle to open something in America, you're doing it wrong. They've made everything easy. That's how a free economy works."(140).

The novel also marks the signs of cultural discrimination and ethnic crossroads that immigrants have to face in America. Manek himself points out and belittles Feroza for not wearing deodorant. Eventually, after being harassed by Manek over and over again, Feroza starts wearing a deodorant. Manek says "You can't smell your own smell, stupid; people are going to start fainting any minute" and belittles her by saying things like- "That's the trouble with you desis. You don't even know what a deodorant is, and you want to make an atom bomb!" (74). He also points out that Americans are not very accepting of

the eating habits of people from Indian subcontinent and he himself is stuck in mimicking that culture to fit in with the society. "You've got to stop eating with your fingers...It makes them sick" (145).

The modern environment of the American land entailed sexual freedom and empowerment as well which was way out of question in Pakistan. Since Pakistan was struggling with personal freedom and equality of rights, sexual freedom had taken a back seat for the females, although it was accessible to the males. Manek told his son Dara that he could have as much fun as wants while his stay in America but in the end he has to marry a Parsee girl, depicting the plight of diasporic consciousness. This freedom was not available to Feroza who was enthralled to experience this later after mingling with the American identity. "To be able to see David, whenever she wanted to, at odd times of the night and early in the morning, to cook together over the weekends, to discover each other's endearing peculiarities and the odd unexpected moments when each looked most seductive to the other, did amount to living together. Feroza was driven by the bouts of guilt. Once, when she was sneaking back into her room at three O'clock in the morning, with her shoes in the hand, she wondered if she was the same girl, who had lived in Lahore and gone to the Convent of the Sacred Heart." (264).

#### **4. Homeland and Host Land Cultural Environment**

Sidhwa has described both geographical and cultural position of both the countries that she stayed in. The physical environment is depicted to be a serene one in Pakistan through the following lines- "It had been a typically gorgeous winter's day, bracing, bright, and windless- except for an occasional breeze that sighed through the chrysanthemums in their neighborhood and masked the reek of exhaust fumes from the buses and rickshaws on the road"(10).The society in Pakistan was facing a political upheaval due to Bhutto's tenure and the society was turning overly orthodox day by day under the influence of General Zia. There is vivid description of Islamization of the country under General Zia's influence and the decreasing rights of the women day by day in the society.

The Host land on the other hand, is shown to be neat and organized one as compared to a buzzing and scattered one in her homeland. As soon as Feroza arrives at the airport, she was awed by the proper conditions at the airport, the bedazzling glass and steel enclosed spaces and the audacious immensity of the sheen of the floor which is depicted in the following lines- "The orderly traffic of rushing people, the bright lights and warmed air, the extraordinary cleanliness and sheen on floors and furnishings, the audacious immensity of the glass-and-steel enclosed spaces dazzled her"(54).

However, her initial excitement was quickly dissolved when she came face to face with the crude reality of the real world. She soon realizes that America not only comprises of its glitz and glamour, but also comprises of a dark side that entails its existing magnanimity. Her euphoria of landing a new country is immediately dissolved when she was taken for a secondary inspection at the airport due to the fact that her passport was in Urdu. That inspection crossed the borders of decency as the personals took to private questions regarding the length of her stay, the person supporting her, age of her guardian in this country etc. They reprimanded her by coming to the conclusion that she was there to see her fiance and present her see through nighty as the proof of their suspicion. This incites anger in Feroza and she remarked by saying "To hell with you and your damn country. I'll go back!" (64).

Furthermore, Manek, her uncle gives her a stark contrast in the cultures of the two states. He shows the multiethnic side of America to Feroza and introduces her to the grim side of some of the people residing over there when he took her on a tour to New York where she visits the 42<sup>nd</sup> street- a place where the dirty and poor reality of New York resided. "So you have seen now, America is not all Saks and skyscrapers" (81). She also comes across people who sold stolen goods and were advertising porn and adult movies.

Comparing the economic situation of the homeland and hostland, Manek informs Feroza of the Wall Street and says, “Do you know, more money changes hands here in one hour than in a whole year in Pakistan?”(72). He highlights the stark contrast of economic situation existing in the Pakistan and America. He describes that one could never get away by paying a bribe for breaking traffic rules here unlike their own home country.

##### **5. Women in the two cultures**

Bapsi Sidhwa being a female Pakistani Parsee herself, gives ample amount of insight into the culture and identity of women in both her homeland and in America. The first point of contact depicting a character fighting for equality of women is Feroza’s mother Zareen. Zareen is infuriated by the current tyranny of the mullahs in Pakistan who try to control every single step of women in the society. Zareen believed in quality of rights and equal opportunities for all sexes. She even tries to equate her husband outwardly by wearing high heels which she did in order to “measure up to my husband” (10).

Although Zareen believes in quality of rights and opportunities for men and women, it is only up to the point where it is not juxtaposed with her cultural beliefs of being a Parsee. When Feroza decides to marry David, Zareen forcefully breaks them up because he didn’t belong to her Parsee community. When she came to visit Feroza, she asked Feroza about the antecedents of David to which she says, “What do you mean, ‘antecedents’? ‘His ancestry, his khandan.’ Oh, you mean his pedigree? ‘If that’s how you like to put it.’ Don’t be absurd, Mum... If you go about talking of people’s pedigrees, the Americans will laugh at you.” (277)

Feroza quickly discovers through her American roommate, the concept of different sexuality as her roommate was a lesbian which was not at all possible in her homeland Pakistan. Jo explains to her that “Some women just prefer women. Others are fed up. American boys change girlfriends every few months. All boys are not like my David. The girls can’t stand the heartache. It takes them months to get over it. Laura says: “If Shirley gets my juices flowing, why should I mess around with boys?” (300). Premarital sex and relationships are out of question for the women in Pakistan, even within her Parsee community. Initially, even though she flirts with the boys when she goes out, Feroza felt guilty of not following her traditions which is depicted in the following lines- “every time she went out with Jo and flirted modestly with strange young men, her dusky face blooming and warm with wine, her eyes bright, she wondered what her family would have to say of her conduct if they knew” (163). Later, she adapts this culture and gets rid of all her feelings of guilt after she met David.

She also learns as part of diaspora that women in America need hard work to succeed anywhere unlike the women in Pakistan who did not participate in the workforce due to the structure of their society and were used to men providing for them. Manek her uncle told her, “The first lesson you learn in America is...you don’t get something for nothing, Manek said.If you want to get into the right college you have to work for it. Nothing is given to you on a plate. You don’t know that because nobody works in Pakistan. Not your father, your grandfathers or uncles.” (124).

He also teaches her that women cannot rely on anyone other than themselves to exercise their agency and succeed in their life which was an alien concept for women that time in Pakistan who were forced to stay inside due to increasing Islamization and whose decisions and existence both were dependent on men which is indicative of diasporic evolution. When Feroza was left alone for some time in the museum, Manek explains that “This taught you more about America than six months of pampering. You’ll see, you’ll gain confidence. You can’t rely on anyone but yourself if you want to live in this country-not even on me.” (135).

Another hint of diaspora is found in the novel when Feroza starts working herself and she is quick to be intoxicated by the sense of freedom and control that the money in her account bought along. When

she enrolls in Denver University and falls short of money, she immediately weighed her options to make money without giving much thought to the type of job she had to do in order to achieve so. "Feroza considered waitressing, working in a bar, becoming a salesperson or selling tickets at an amusement park. These jobs were within her range—if she took the chances the other foreign students took—and was prepared to work for less than minimum wage. Feroza found the very concept of these jobs breathtaking, beyond the compass of the possible in Pakistan." (216).

The way Feroza carried herself is also changed when she started enjoying the freedom in America as part of the diasporic culture. Initially, she was described as plain girl who was "trott[ing] in her high heels, turquoise shalwar-kamiz though the streets of New York" (72). She could never have imagined wearing shoes and sleeveless clothing, let alone wearing shorts. This changed quickly after she spent some time with her new friends. "After a period of association with Gwen and Rhonda, Feroza finally mustered up the courage one sweltering noon to get into a spare pair of Rhonda's shorts. Both her roommates applauded and assured her that she looked just great" (225).

## 6. Linguistic Diaspora as Part of Cultural Diaspora

Language is a part of any culture and the way one uses language depicts an entire culture and society associated with that language and hence is closely linked with diaspora. Sidhwa has made use of the contrast in language used by Feroza in her initial days and later on during her stay America to show the extent of influence of the American culture on her mind and personality. Language brings empowerment and since Feroza spoke in a foreign accent, she had to face many difficulties initially. "It was almost like learning a new language, and both sometimes wondered if the other knew enough English." (149).

She had a courteous way of addressing people which did not resonate with the American way of speaking. Eventually, Jo cured her of her habit of "May I have this—may I have that?" (154) and she was quick to catch on the slangs and speak in a more American style of "Gimme a lemonade. Gimme a soda. Hey, you goin' to the laundry? Gimme a Coke!" (154). Under the influence of Jo, Feroza also learnt to speak in abusive manner, which she could not even dream of while living in Pakistan. "Jo's extraordinary capacity for expletives, which matcher her other appetites soon had Feroza saying "shit" and "ass hole" with an abandon that epitomized for her the heady reality of her being abroad, away from home, and even if she knew it was an illusion, a sense of control over her actions." (159).

## 7. Conclusion

In this paper, we have described the cultural dichotomy that was present in various forms as part of Diaspora in Bapsi Sidhwa's Novel "An American Brat". We saw the evolving diasporic consciousness in the novel through Feroza's eyes and shed light on how language, society, structural arrangement of the society shape the cultural intersections in any immigrant's life.

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