

# Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*: A Study of Conflicting Social Values

Anoopama Yadav

PhD Research Scholar

Department of English and Modern Languages  
Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan

Dr. Tamishra Swain

Assistant Professor

Department of English and Modern Languages  
Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan

## ABSTRACT

There is a constant diffusion of language, race and culture in today's world. More and more people from developing countries are migrating to the developed countries for the advancement and for a better livelihood. In the present scenario, it becomes inevitable for writers from developing countries to portray the dilemma these people face due to differences in social values and belief system. Impact of dominating culture of America on the social values of people belonging to Pakistan is projected by Bapsi Sidhwa in 'An American Brat'. Experiences of a Pakistani Parsee girl named Feroza is uncovered in this novel. To change her puritanical outlook, she is moved to America by her parents. The life style of woman following tradition and social values in her married life and a self-standing woman, who develops her own criteria after assimilation in American culture is discussed. In this paper, the impact of conflict in social values among different characters is also covered. The root of the problem is studied in light of the essay 'Can The Subaltern Speak?' given by Postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak. The concluding part alludes the feminist self-affirmation.

**Keywords: Social Values, Belief System, Parsee Community, Conflict, Traditional Culture, Modern, Subaltern, Feminist.**

## INTRODUCTION

The South Asian writings are primarily diasporic and deals with migratory characters and these writings represent a theatrical platform for highlighting the identity crisis. The characters in the writings migrate and get settled in a foreign land, sometimes called the 'host land'. Yet these migratory characters do not completely forget their country of origin, and regards it as 'home' or 'homeland'. It is not that easy to adopt the culture, language, and customs of the new country. The reason may be simple, when the travellers are born and brought up in their homelands, viz. Indian Sub-continent. They travel mostly to foreign countries especially European nations, USA and UK. The new countries are culturally different and adopting and adapting with the new cultures of those countries is not free from confrontation, which is different in varied ways, ranging from marriage, customs, rituals, thoughts and flash back of memories.

The novel is set around thirty one years after independence of Pakistan. The country was in political turmoil as Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government was dissolved. Martial law was forced and Bhutto was sentenced to death. Life of a common man was influenced by it. The story contains two parts: The first part gives account of Feroza's life in Pakistan and her unwillingness to change while the other entails a series of changes that occur naturally in her life in modern America. In America, there is a marked change in appearance and character of Feroza and Manek, her young uncle from passive beings into strongly desirous

and aspiring youth. The question posed here is what role does first world “America” and Third world “Pakistan” play.

Sidhwa aptly handles the existing issue of conflict in social values faced by different characters of the novel, in a socially conscious way. She is a reputed Parsee writer and feminist in approach. She has compared and contrasted the women belonging to both the societies of Pakistan and America in an intense manner. In the novel, the impact of conflict in values is sensed in both the cultures on ‘social plane’ as well as on ‘personal plane’. Parsees are people who pursue the religion Zoroastrianism. They carry out different practices in their religion. Bapsi as a Parsee writer has shown her strong bonding with Parsee community by means of her works. Her novels aid to apprehend the socio-cultural background of her community. They reflect pre and postcolonial era of the subcontinent.

Sidhwa’s ‘An American Brat’, the fourth novel published in 1993, gives an account of the clash in social values and belief system. It is depicted with the help of a central character Feroza. Bapsi has concentrated on the metamorphosis of a sixteen year old girl, Feroza. She has dealt with the customs, belief system, social values, life style and behaviour of Pakistani people, Parsee people and American people. She adopts the ways of Americans resulting into an American Brat. She takes or receives as her own what is not so natural for a Parsee.

The clash or disagreement enters into Parsee life when the modern generation adopts the ways of Americans. In this novel, it is perceived that modern generation has approved a new point of view. The modern generation thinks that it is unavoidable to do the marriages outside of faith.

Zareen observes Feroza turning more narrow-minded gradually. This is obviously true in her conservative reactions to small matters. Zareen says “She won’t even answer the phone anymore! What if it is someone I don’t know? No one’s going to jump out of the phone to bite you!” (AB, 10) To show it Jyoti Yadav states, “The conflict between the anxiety to preserve the ethnic identity and the need to adapt oneself to the other cultures is revealed in the novel through the decision of Zareen to send her daughter Feroza to America.” (Yadav, 84-85)

Parsee society is the one that put into practice and dictate over its members by means of instruments such as continuous monitoring and right or authority to order in the novel. The regime of Zia, in Pakistan is depicted as exerting discipline to the extent of the society being terrified. Parsee though a miniscule community in Pakistan, sharing same tradition, law and manners nevertheless they have their own identity. The Parsee ladies have different dressing sense than the ladies of other communities. But Feroza being a typical Pakistani girl criticizes her mother. Zareen proceeds with another occasion to her husband Cyrus “I went to bring Feroza from school today .... I had removed my cardigan... In the car she said: Mummy, please don’t come to school dressed like that. She objected to my sleeveless sari-blouse!” (AB, 10)

Feroza relates to a wealthy Parsee family residing in Lahore. On account of puritanical government, she becomes old fashioned. Her family sends her on a three month holiday to America in order to “Broaden her outlook, get this puritanical rubbish out of her head.”(AB, 14)

## SOCIETY IN THIRD WORLD COUNTRIES

Women in the Third World countries have a subordinate stature. The patriarchal society marginalises their women. Their behaviour is checked in the name of culture, tradition, social norms and religion. They are relegated a position of second class citizen and not allowed to cross the boundaries set for them by patriarchy. In the societies of South East Asia, mothers carryout their duties keeping in mind the harmony with patriarchy system. She passes on knowledge to children what is means to be a boy or a girl from their cultural system in which they inhabit. In this way, they incorporate the norms of culture and society in their thinking. Females are guided to be modest, docile and rely on males of the family. When Feroza’s classmates come to see-off her at airport “they clung together, shy smiles twitching on their lips.... leaning

on one another.(AB, 48)“As men at airport came ogling the girls, their uncle, took a couple of determined strides.... in front of two men.” (AB, 49)

Feroza is the central character in the novel. She is introduced as a fearful girl who hesitates to even answer a call on telephone. But as the story advances she is projected as free, confident and independent girl. The transformation of her character is aided by different characters through the novel. Exposure of female clothing in public is taken as the act of mortifying on one’s dignity. When the inspector at Kennedy Airport asks Feroza to show her suitcase, the inspector lifts her mothers’ dress in inappropriate manner. This act hurts the feelings of Feroza. She wants to return to Lahore. During this instance, Manek notify: “And better you’d forget this honor-shonar business. Nobody bothers about that here.” (AB, 66) Feroza’s uncle Manek inspires her to stay in America and complete her education there. He is instrumental in making her adaptive to free life of America. She strives to assimilate the independent way of American.

#### CONFLICT IN SOCIAL VALUES OF THE CHARACTERS OF THE NOVEL

The novel portrays a strong drift from the customs which was valued or highly esteemed in her conscious. She strives to adjust with the life style of America and completely changes herself into an impudent American. Feroza sets herself free from all religious and traditional prejudices and goes against the belief system of her Zoroastrian community. Her transformation in America does not occur in a single night but takes several years.

Although, there are many instances in the story when she repents and feels guilty of committing sin according to her belief system. Under the influence of her American roommate Jo, she is able to drive and use the American slang. Late one evening in one of the parties, she commits the ‘Cardinal Sin’ by taking a puff from a cigarette offered to her. Smoking is considered a grave sin according to Parsee tradition. They believe that fire is pure and if it comes in contact with one’s unclean mouth then the sinner has to repent. Feroza repents by reciting some prayers “After performing the Kusti ritual, Feroza bowed her penitent’s head to beg divine forgiveness for desecrating the holy fire – the symbol of Ahura Mazda.” (AB, 165) However in the later stage, it is hinted that Feroza becomes a casual smoker. When Zareen goes to stay at her place, a short reference is given “neither smoked before Zareen.” (AB, 288)

Feroza is usually found questioning herself. She had no experience of dating in Pakistan. It was against the social values of her religion. She didn’t know how to behave and socialize with boys America. “I feel like I’m spoiling everybody’s fun..... I keep thinking of it and feel miserable.” (AB, 162)Jo insists Feroza to enjoy the free life of America with her. Gradually she starts going out to parties with Jo. Pants and shorts take on the place of Salwar-kameez. At times, she feels guilty but flirts with boys. Nonetheless, this uncertainty in her mind is short lived. She quickly learns not to care so much about what opinion others have regarding her.

After a short trip to her homeland, she apprehends that her life is on an entirely different plane from her friends and relatives. Her thinking has undergone a metamorphosis. And the issues and social values that they keep engaged with do not have any place in her life. In fact, it is in Feroza’s guilt where her belief system lies. Her relationship with boyfriend David Press becomes more intense and complex. She enjoys company of David but is constantly haunted by guilt. It is evident in these lines “Once when she was sneaking back into her room at three o’clock in the morning with her shoes in her hand, she wondered if she was the same girl who had lived in Lahore and gone to the convent of the Scared Heart.” (AB, 264) Feroza after experiencing the free life of U.S.A turns into a modern girl. It becomes impossible for her to return back to tradition bound society in Pakistan. By adopting the ways of Americans she really becomes an American Brat.

Manek Junglewalla, 22 years old young man in the novel is Feroza’s uncle. He is only six years her senior and acts like a friend to her. Manek is presented as complicated and is not a straight forward guy. He

is intelligent and getting valuable education. His work on P.hd thesis in chemical and structural engineering is viewed as valuable by the professor. Therefore, he gets a job at NASA. Manek has no desire to go back to Pakistan. He is depicted as conscientious and sensitive. He has unpleasant experiences of selling Bibles while staying with Patel family in Atlanta. Feroza sees her uncle as modest and paradoxically, more confident and quite apprehensive, consciously thoughtful and observant, yet at a necessary level tougher, even pitiless. In a telephonic conversation with her mother she asserts that her brother has changed.

Even though he is an accomplished man in America, but he is lacking the ability to be free from the inferiority complex he is instigated by the gora complex. He enjoys the company of free women in America, but chooses to marry Aban, a Pakistani Parsee girl selected by his family. His viewpoint is reflected by traditional Parsee. He does not want to have a boldly self-assured and confident American wife who requires much endurance. It would hurt his sense of self importance. Although, he adopts the principles of American people but his affinity to social values is not completely side lined. He shows his dominance towards his wife who is a true representative of traditional Parsee wife.

Manek is not at all shocked when Feroza discloses her love for a Jew named David Press. He reminds her of differences in both the cultures and suggests her to give some more time before finalising her marriage with David. He is also a representative of modern generation. He changes his name to become familiar with people at his work place. He adopts new name Mike Junglevala in place of Manek Junglewalla. He justifies the change in name for the following reason. "The people I have to deal with at work find it hard to remember Manek. It's too foreign... But I'm one of the guys if I'm Mike." (AB, 260) Manek becomes aware of the fact that he needs to form a new identity for himself for survival in America. His wife too addresses him by the name 'Mike' when they are with Americans.

Manek's wife Aban is a perfect representative of traditional Parsee wife. She is not bold and confident rather docile and conservative woman. She is deep rooted to the values and traditions of Parsees. Divorce is inconceivable to her which is so common in western societies. She rejects to the very idea of her husband of legally sharing their house in America in case they breakup in future and she is deprived. She doesn't sleep that night as she had come to know in her culture. "That a wife only left her husbands' house feet first, in her coffin. The mention of divorce was... an affront to all that was auspicious and lucky. Such ill-omened words could not help but attract misfortune." (AB, 259) Even mention of the word 'divorce' in a gentle manner was taken up as an indication of omen by her.

Khutlibai is grandmother of Feroza. In spite of the fact that granddaughter and grandsons of khutlibai have endured modern views, she opposes the modern views as is the embodiment of traditional Parsee women. She strictly follows the principles of Zarathustra. She gives importance to Sudra and Kusti to wear. Her idea of decency in dressing varies from her own daughter Zareen. She shows her aversion as "You've stopped wearing your Sudra and kusti: you prefer to show your skin at the waist. What kind of example are you setting for your child?" (AB, 31) Khutlibai had her reservations about her daughter's decision to send Feroza to USA. Khutlibai's reluctance to send granddaughter Feroza to States is evident from these lines. "So you must also jump into the well? God knows what will become of the poor child..." (AB, 121)

Sidhwa in a jocular way shows how elders apply the social pressures of conformity and long run tradition on the new generation by using tricks of emotional blackmail. Reproaching a young cousin who dares to support Feroza's choice, Khutlibai plans to utter with contemptuous expression in way that the defiance of Bunny, Dara and others ceases at primitive stage. She cites the case of Rodabai, who was not allowed to enter into the room with her grandmother's body because she had married a Christian. Khutli reveals to them, "She was made to stand outside on the bench like a leper! Would you like that to happen to you when your grandmother dies?"

Sidhwa appraises her readers on the upbringing of Parsee girls. She writes: “Every Parsee girl grew up warned of the catastrophe that would take the shape of a good looking non-Parsee man. Marrying outside her community matters and certainly bar her from her faith.” (AB, 17)

Zareen is a modern Parsee woman. She sends her daughter Feroza to US despite stiff opposition from Khutlibai. She is optimistic that exposure to foreign place would sharpen her daughter’s uncouth consciousness. But after sometime, she observes great change in Feroza when she comeback to Pakistan for renewal of her visa. Zareen becomes terrified on seeing the new look of her daughter “was this flaming, confident creature.... The same timid little thing who had refused to answer the phone?” (AB, 236)

At this juncture, Zareen wants her daughter to stay in Pakistan and get married. But Feroza declines her suggestion as she wants to complete her studies. Zareen’s irritation is obvious, as she says, “What’s this new graduate shaduate nonsense? We send you to America for three months, and you end up spending almost three years! ... listen to us, Its time you settle down.” (AB, 241) These lines suggest that Zareen wants her daughter to be modern to a limited extent. At this point, she wants Feroza to get rooted to her own culture and follow the social norms of Parsee tradition.

#### A PARSEE MARRYING A NON-PARSEE

Zareen attempts to elaborate the demerits of marrying a Jew. She warns her daughter that after marrying a non-Parsee she will be excommunicated from her Parsee community. She would be banned from visiting places related to worship of her community. In a demanding way, she alludes to Feroza that she should obliivate about David and focus on academics. Every workable endeavour is done to change Feroza’s opinion. When Feroza becomes adamant on the marriage issue, Zareen explodes: “I should never have let you go so far away. Look what it’s done to you-you’ve become an American Brat!” (AB, 279) As Zareen gets acquainted with David, she desires him to be her son-in-law. She is not contented to know about the inflexible code of Parsee culture. Zareen sees herself interrogating the prohibition on Parsee marrying a non-Parsee. Her mind becomes uncertain and she “feels herself suddenly aligned with the thinking of liberates and reformists.” (AB, 288)She ponders about how she is treating her own daughter by restraining her within the boundaries of social values. To describe this issue, Seema R.Gida states:“Feroza’s conservative mother Zareen ironically realizes by denying her daughters freedom of choice in marriage, she is doing a great injustice to her. (Gida, 82)

Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak in the essay “Can the Subaltern Speak” depict “subaltern as those who belong to the third world countries. It is impossible for them to speak up as they are divided by gender, class, caste, region, religion and other narratives. These divisions do not allow them to stand up in unity. Women in the world over are still structurally subordinated to men.”Zareen gets trapped with self related to social values. She wonders about the existing double standards taken by choice by men in Parsee community. Male can marry a non-Parsee female and still continue to be called Parsee but the same is not the case of Parsee women. It is regarded as violation of Parsee tradition and values. Parsee men can up bring their children according to their customs and traditions.“This is however not to say that the physical act of speaking is impossible from within the subaltern position, but it is to say that this speech never gets accepted as meaningful utterances which carries the weight of socio-political agency and which can articulate self-interest and self-identity.” (Spivak)

Sidhwa’s vision of free and independent women is deeply embedded in the women’s position within the socio-cultural and economic spaces and system of belief of her country. The women protagonist in a definite manner decline to confirm the established doctrine of faith and obey against their will to accept the traditional doctrines of religion, outmoded culture and conventionally ideal identities. The novelist has an acute vision at the gulf in the cultural aspects of community, operating to the drawback of the women. Opposition by Feroza and Zareen in the novel clearly speaks of both the being hood of the patriarchy

domination and the women wish to deny and challenge that system. Spivak opines. “In order to be heard, subaltern must adopt dominant thought, reasoning and language.” In societies like this, the female capability, vulnerability and sense of self-esteem are all influenced by forces of third world culture. Through the main character Feroza, the writer portrays the modern generation of Parsee community. This generation is not willing to follow their religion. In the words of Lata Rengachari: “An American Brat talks specifically of the woman in exile and celebrates the better understanding of oneself and one’s culture that distance and exile offer.” (Rengachari, 57)

Fluidity in character is obvious when Feroza is sent to America and come into being westernized. After facing failure in relationship, Feroza desires privacy and liberty from social restraints of her culture which the first world promises. She becomes aware that it is not essential to set aside her social values and belief system from herself in order to survive in America. She re-adorns her Sudra and Kusti and call upon Ahura Mazda’s blessings. She makes up her mind that “There would be no going back for her” (AB, 317)

## CONCLUSION

Sidhwa in an apprehensive way has projected her values through vivid and distinct Parsee characters of Pakistan. In the novel, she had displayed the standstill patriarchy system harnessing age-old social values and belief systems before the readers. The women of these societies are obliged to follow this practice unquestioningly. This obedience bounds women to enjoy independence in a true sense. They become submissive and dependent. Age old social system is accountable for creating a tight spot for women in the Indian subcontinent especially in Pakistan. So, when they confront a different culture of west, they face conflict in social values and belief system endowed during their upbringing in homeland. In the quest for balancing their identity, they imbibe western value system. Thus drift in their life style away from tradition bound society of subcontinent leads to conflict in their social values as well.

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