

# DIASPORA IN BAPSI SIDHWA'S AN *AMERICAN BRAT*

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to examine the diasporic realities in Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *An American Brat*. Diaspora brings a metamorphosis in the characters' personalities in the novel and evolution of the characters through the struggle to adapt on foreign soil. The study also brings the various elements of diaspora such as identity, hybridity, mimicry, alienation and orientation. The novel *An American Brat* unveils the experiments of Feroza, a Pakistani girl, belonging to the Parsee community, shifted to the United States by her family to make her modern in approach and outlook.

## Diaspora

The term 'Diaspora' is derived from the Greek term "diasperien", from "dia-across" and "sperien-to sow or scatter seed". It is based on Hebrew word of diaspora- 'galut', meaning 'exile' (that is from the Holy Land) (The New Encyclopedia of Britannica (vol.3)).

So the term 'Diaspora' is used to refer to any people of ethnic population forced or induced to leave their traditional ethnic homelands; being dispersed throughout other parts of the world; and the ensuing developments in their dispersal and culture.

Today, 'Diaspora' refers to a range of ethnic communities and a variety of categories of people like- political and war refugees, migrants, ethnic and racial communities, immigrants/expatriates/transnational communities. In short, the term 'diaspora' denotes communities of people dislocated from their homelands through migration, immigration or exile as a result of imperialism, colonial expansion, trade, business, hunger for better prospects and Globalization.

## An American Brat

*An American Brat* is a story of a young Pakistani Parsee girl Feroza. The conservative attitude of Feroza in Pakistan creates tension to her mother Zareen and father Cyrus. Cyrus decides to send Feroza to the USA for holiday which may broaden her outlook. Sidhwa narrates the experiences of expatriate in the USA. At the end Feroza's love affair with David, a Jew fails because of interference of her mother. She decides to struggle for freedom and self-fulfillment in the USA instead of settling in Lahore with her parents. In the novel Sidhwa sensitizes the issues of inter-community marriage in the Parsee, their traditional different attitudes towards male and female in marriage relationship in the Parsee community and the issues of the expatriates.

Sidhwa's *An American Brat* deals with the metamorphosis of an expatriate. Feroza desires to be an immigrant and refuses to return to her homeland, Pakistan after living four years in America. The experience of diaspora can be seen both empowering as well as disempowering for women in the novel. Sidhwa introduces Feroza's identity from multiple geographical spatial locations : Pakistan and America. These locations demand contrast codes of conduct resulting in hybrid and conflictual tendencies among the the individuals in diaspora.

## MIGRATION

In the novel, different characters migrate at different places at different times under different circumstances. The protagonist of the novel, Feroza is a young girl living in Lahore, Pakistan. Under the rule of General Zia, Pakistani religious fundamentalists have made strict rules for women. There are different codes of conduct for men and women. Men have more liberty as compared to women. Zareen thinks that her daughter has become more orthodox under the influence of Islamic fundamentalist. When Zareen goes to take her from school, Feroza says, "Mummy, Please don't come to school dressed like that" (10). The reason for migration of the protagonist is to get rid of the religious conservatism in the contemporary politics of Pakistan, to which the progressive Parsee family in Pakistan believes that it will spoil Feroza. Her migration to America may be considered as non-voluntary because of non-favorable socio-political circumstances of the homeland. When Zareen's mother objects to the idea of sending Feroza to America, Zareen explains her reason for sending Feroza, "You've no idea how difficult Feroza's been of late. All this talk about Islam, and how women should dress, and how women should behave, is turning her quite strange. And you know how Bhutto's trail is getting to her" (30). So, initially, the migration from the third world country to a developed country for Feroza is a desire of her parents that she has to obey. But she feels enthusiastic about visiting the developed country. The migration for the protagonist Feroza is not voluntary on her part initially. Feroza's parents think that she is depressed because of the politics of Pakistan and she may go to America for a short holiday at her maternal uncle's place for three or four months after her metric examination. The aim of her parents is "Travel will broaden her outlook, get this puritanical rubbish out of her head" (14). Later on Feroza likes the country starts her study there and makes efforts in getting settled there only.

Another character Manek, Feroza's uncle is depicted as an immigrant for his education and has F-1 visa. As per law, he is not permitted to work, but he works in the university cafeteria and does odd jobs. Manek assimilates with the culture, lifestyle of America. later marries a Parsee girl from Pakistan. works in NASA and settles in America with her. Aban, wife of Manek, migrates to America. Her migration is permanent after marriage.

Sidhwa gives examples of people migrating from Pakistan to India as well as from India to Pakistan during the partition of India to preserve their religious identity. This is forced migration due to political reason. Zareen goes to America, just to convince her daughter not to marry a non-Parsee. Her travel to America is just a visit.

## HOMELAND

Sidhwa has described the geographical location of her homeland, especially the city of Lahore. “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 neighbourhood and masked the reek of exhaust fumes from the buses and rickshaws on the road”(10). The ancestors of Zareen came from a village in Central India to Lahore.

Sidhwa mentions about the political upheaval in Pakistan related to the issue of hanging Bhutto. Khushwant Singh comes to Pakistan to meet General Zia. Sidhwa mentions about Bhutto’s deeds and misdeeds during his prime minister ship, the Islamization of state institutions by General Zia, and death sentence to Bhutto. There is a general talk on Pakistan’s politics on Bhutto to be hanged. At one early morning Bhutto was hanged in the Rawalpindi jail and All India radio announced the news. There were appeals from Amnesty International. Other human rights all over the world. The novel mentions the political events of India as a neighbouring country. Two Indian aircraft have been hijacked by the Sikh separatists in

the past few months.

Food has always remained an identity of culture and tradition. The novelist gives idea about culture of food and eating habits of people in the homeland, here, in Pakistan at the auspicious occasion of farewell of Feroza. It was the usual auspicious-occasion fare: sweet vermicelli sprinkled with fried raisins and almonds, thick slices of spicy fried salmon, and fruit. Round stainless steel platters contained yogurt as firm as jelly, upon which a thick skin of clotted cream had formed.(44)

The religion of Pakistan is Islam and on Friday, they announce prayer from the mosque in a loud sound. The Parsee religious and cultural traditions are narrated at the time of departure of Feroza and marriage of Manek.

## HOSTLAND

Bapsi Sidhwa, who lives in America now, portrays the hostland through her characters. The landscape, political condition and economy of America are mentioned in the novel. On arriving in America, Feroza finds cleanliness and discipline at New York airport. “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). The locale of New York is vividly described by Sidhwa. Manek takes Feroza on a tour of New York. They ride the ferry to the Statue of Liberty, Empire State Building, and the twin World Trade towers at the tip of the island. They visit the zoo at Central Park, Manhattan. The novel as a diaspora text gives us glimpse about multi-ethnic America. Feroza is used to the dirt and garbage in Pakistan but here on 42nd street she finds poverty

stricken people and foul smelling garbage. So Manek comments, “So you have seen now, America is not all Saks and skyscrapers” (81). People are selling stolen goods and they find cinema marquees advertising of adult and porn movies. Thus Sidhwa has portrayed dark side of America also.

Manek says about the Brigham Young University in Salt Lake City where one would not be allowed to drink or indulge in premarital sex, one has to pledge to abide by the college dress and conduct codes. Manek warns Feroza, “you wouldn’t be allowed to wear shorts or bikinis. And if you were a boy, you’d be allowed to wear a beard or keep your hair long” (138).

The economic development of America is explained by Manek. Wall Street is considered to be the hub of business of the world. Manek says to Feroza, “Do you know, more money changes hands here in one hour than in a whole year in Pakistan?”(72) It is common in India or Pakistan to bribe a police for breaching traffic rules but in America when the police ticket tucked under the wiper of one’s car, there is no possibility of getting rescued from the fine just by paying bribe to the police authorities.

During her stay at various colleges and her friendship with David, and Luis, Feroza visits cosmopolitan America. Sidhwa has brought the contemporary economic issue of the developed countries. During the last two decades many young students have migrated to developed countries especially in Germany, the UK, Australia, Canada and the US for their Masters Degree course. There they have to pay high fees and as on F 1 students visa, they cannot do full time job. Thus Sidhwa has depicted the condition of hostland America, its economy and locale.

The novel narrates incidents where there is a clash between Manek and Feroza, because of ego of both. Manek considers that Feroza needs to learn how to assimilate in the culture of America; her manners should be proper. Whenever he makes an effort to improve Feroza, Feroza considers him to be so called Americanized. Thus through the interaction of Feroza and Manek, Sidhwa gives idea about the attitude of immigrants towards the other immigrants and the homeland.

## **IDENTITY CRISIS**

The novel gives idea about the concern for identity among the immigrants. Feroza being the only child of her parents feels lonely especially when at the dinner time or evening family gathering, the members talk about the politics of Pakistan. The sense of alienation of Feroza in Pakistan is not for her search for identity, but the religious and political turmoil in the state.

The text narrates the feelings of an immigrant while leaving homeland. The departure for America makes Feroza emotional and longing for her identity. Feroza feels that she would miss Lahore and her family. Sudden tears welled in Feroza’s eyes. She brushed them away.

In America, though with Manek, Feroza misses her country, people and finds alien in white dominated society. She finds queer at the university and with her roommates. Torn between the free life style of America and the conservative society of Pakistan that she has seen, Feroza becomes more aloof.

## **NOSTALGIA**

The novel depicts the feelings of nostalgia and its role in the present life among the immigrants. Before partition, the people of all religions were living with harmony and respect other religions. Zareen remembers people of various faith visit fifteenth-century shrine from all over Pakistan, and before partition they came from all over northern India.

Longing for homeland and relatives is very common among the diaspora. Here when Manek listens on phone that Feroza is coming, he gets excited to see someone from his family. Feeling of nostalgia and memories of homeland is a key feature in diaspora text and from the beginning of Feroza's journey to America she feels it. Feroza remembers her school days in Lahore. She becomes homesick and finds it impossible to work on her term paper. Sidhwa also mentions that nostalgia is experienced by these characters not only in physical sense, but it is a psychological condition also. The characters become nostalgic even for food and celebration of Parsee rituals and gatherings.

## **WOMEN IN HOMELAND AND HOSTLAND**

Being a female, the novelist has given ample incidences in the novel to give idea about issues of women in Pakistan as well as in America. Zareen believes in equality of sex. Zareen's attitude is such that she wants to equal her husband outwardly also. Zareen always wore high heels "To measure up to my husband" (10).

Zareen is critical about the separate codes of conduct in Pakistan that man may drink even if it is prohibited whereas the woman cannot wear sleeveless cloths. She denies Cyrus to manage his shoes and keep them clean. Cyrus still feels that his daughter should not be exposed in a play in public. Zareen is a symbol of women protesting against the code of conducts for women.

. In a review, Edit Villarreal suggests that the coming-of-age theme is closely linked with the theme of immigration in Bapsi Sidhwa's novel: "Coming of age is never easy. Coming of as a woman is even harder. But coming of age as a female immigrant in a foreign country may be the most difficult of all. For any woman born into societies with restrictive social and political codes, however immigration may be the only real way to come of age" (7)

## CONCLUSION

The novel brings various issue of diaspora viz., reason for migration, depiction of homeland and hostland, attitude of diaspora with homeland and hostland, issues of identity and feelings of nostalgia. Feroza has really become a brat – a spoiled child who defies her parents on the issue of her marriage. The docile, submissive, orthodox immigrant from a third world country has really become a resisting and arrogant. The present study of Bapsi Sidhwa demonstrates the issues associated with transformation of oneself. The canvas of her thematic content enlarges and the complexity of cultural assimilation acquires a new dimension.

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