

A REVAMP OF IDENTITY : A STUDY OF BAPSI SIDWA'S *AN AMERICAN BRAT*

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Abstract: Bapsi Sidwa is a Pakistani novelist striving to bring women's issues of the Indian subcontinent into public discussion. All her novels explore women's condition in particular settings and chart the development of South Asian women from passivity to the path of action. Her novel *An American Brat* focuses on the life of a young Pakistani Parsi girl, Feroza in U.S.A, who challenges the patriarchal and religious norms related to women's issues. This paper tries to unwrap the underlying meaning of self identity. Whether the term self identity has different dimensions? Is it a static one or it undergoes changes as to different life situations and new culture confrontation? If a change of identity brings a new face to life it would readily be accepted by every individual.

Keywords: Diaspora, migration, identity, cultural crisis.

Introduction

Bapsi Sidhwa is a prominent writer of Pakistan Diaspora. Her major works reflect her personal experience of the Partition of Indian subcontinent, abuse against women, immigration to the US, membership in the Parsi or Zoroastrian community, and other such related issues and concerns. She has also been trying to bring them into public discussion on a global platform. The term "Diaspora" is used to refer either to singular person or 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. Basically Diaspora is an experience of dislocation and physical displacement from the motherland and it raises socio-cultural and psychosomatic identity questions which have led to a hybrid culture and a new process of cultural assimilation. A mixed cultural milieu opens up new vistas of communication and dialogue in this cosmopolitan world. The uprooting of the individuals or migration from their native lands and subsequently, their efforts to settle in a country with alien socio-cultural ways and their yearning for the roots has become a prominent theme of post-colonial writing. Peculiar experiences caused by migration and native communities, rootlessness become a major issue of the post-colonial society and a prime concern of the post-colonial writers; and hence, it is also regarded as an identity crisis as well as search for identity.

Being a Native

The novel, *An American Brat* unveils the experiences of Feroza, a Pakistani girl, belonging to the Parsee community, shifted to the United States and the cultural crisis that she confronts during the process of her migration to America. Feroza's parents – Zareen and Cyrus Ginwalla are bewildered to see her conservative attitude, a result of Pakistani fundamentalist attitude. Sharing her shock, Zareen informs her husband,

"She objected to my sleeveless saree-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 of 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 act like that. Girls mustn't play hockey or sign 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!" (*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. They decide to send her to USA for a holiday. They are of the opinion that travelling will broaden her outlook and she will be in a position to get rid of her Puritanism. When Zareen's mother, Khutlibai comes to know that Zareen and Cyrus are sending Feroza to America, she gets angry. Zareen convinces her saying that she is going only for 3 to 4 months. She adds: You've no idea how difficult Feroza's been.... All this talk about Islam, and how women should dress, and how women should behave, is turning her quite strange (*American Brat* 30). Finally, she is sent to America to her maternal uncle,

Manek, who is a student there. Throughout her journey, Feroza behaves as instructed by the elders back in Pakistan but as soon as she reaches America she begins to change.

Beats of new world

The moment she lands on to the Kennedy Airport, she feels the freedom. She is amazed to see the orderly traffic, bright lights and audacity of glass and steel. However, the experience with the passport officer becomes a shocking one for her. She did never expect a series of questions like that. For the first time she realizes that it was a country of strangers. She also passes through some good experiences. When she encounters a moving staircase, an American couple helps her use the down escalator. She finds stark difference between her people and the Americans. She finds them unselfconscious who are always engulfed in their own issues and concerns. For her, the experience is no less than that of a prisoner getting free after an imprisonment for about 16 years. She is happy with the taste of freedom which she never had, “She knew no one, and no one knew her! It was a heady feeling to be suddenly so free – for the moment, at least – of the thousand constraints that governed her life.” (American Brat 58) The author clearly depicts the culture clash here. A conservative, a person with backwardness in her thoughts is set free in a country so free and open.

Manek’s initial struggles to cope with the US culture help him to guide his niece, Feroza to face with ease the problems which he faced. He considers his experiences as lessons to teach Feroza about the US. Manek takes Feroza on a tour of New York to indoctrinate her with western history and culture, and improve her mind on Western aspect of modernity. She beholds with awe the glitzy and dazzling socio-cultural and historical aspect of the town. They ride to the Statue of Liberty, World Trade Towers, Wall Street, Lexington Avenue, Manhattan Skyline, Fifth Avenue and Madison, YMCA Cafeteria, and several other places of historical importance. Manek also shows her the gloomy side of the western city by drawing her attention to male prostitutes, the pimps and miniskirt prostitutes. However, she finds it hard to accept the poverty and stench of filth in USA. Feroza had been accustomed to the odour of filth, the reek of poverty sweat, urine, open drains and the other debris. These sights and smells in Pakistan had developed a tolerance for them. (American Brat)

Gradually Feroza succumbs to America’s charms and decides to stay on as a student. Manek wants her to join a junior college in Twin Falls, Idaho, a small town, which he thought would ease her assimilation into the American way of life. Manek teaches her things – small and big. She learns and experiences things right from rubbing the deodorant stick to using the elevators. Manek prepares a list of what Feroza should know and experience; he teaches her to be more alert and less trusting; whenever she wrestles with a jar or juice bottle, he says: “Remember this: If you have to struggle to open something in America, you’re doing it wrong. They’ve made everything easy” (American Brat 140). Equipped with worldly wisdom, Feroza goes to college. she’ll teach you more than I can. Just remember everything I’ve told you. Don’t become ‘ethnic’ Before leaving her, Manek says:

“. . . You’re lucky you’ve not been palmed off with some Japanese or Egyptian roommate. Jo’s a real American; and eat with your fingers in the dorm. And don’t butt in when someone’s talking” (American Brat 148).

Being an American immigrant

Now Feroza’s American roommate, Jo takes charge of her life as a guide. She teaches her American English, and makes her give up Pakistani clothes and earrings. Feroza now wears jeans, T shirts, sweaters, and blouses. They rent a two-bedroom apartment. Initially Feroza is thrilled at the thought of living with just Jo, but soon discovers a fresh aspect of her roommate’s social life. Jo is fond of boys. She picks them up from various places like restaurant, theatre, construction site, stores and also brings them home. She also makes Feroza learn to flirt with boys. But not having much experience of socializing with boys, Feroza feels awkward. Jo initiates her into smoking and drinking wine. Eventually Feroza also starts enjoying the company of boys. Sometimes she has a guilty feeling of what her family will think about her conduct, but she accepts it as her assimilation into the American lifestyle:

As the pressure of constraints, so deeply embedded in her psyche, slightly loosened their grip under Jo’s influence, Feroza felt she was growing the wings Father Fibs had talked about, which, even at this incipient stage, would have been ruthlessly clipped in Pakistan. Feroza was curious to discover how they might grow, the shape and the reach of their span. This was her secret, this sense of growth and discovery, and she did not want to divulge any part of it, even to Manek. (American Brat 164)

Under the influence of Jo, Feroza completely adapts an American life-style. She acts, talks and dresses like an American girl. The shy and conservative Feroza turns into a confident and self-assertive girl. To put Feroza on the track of modernization, Sidhwa has shown her sharing room with different types of mates—the American girl Jo. Rhonda and Gwen, and the lesbians Laura and Shirley; thus, through the interaction with people of various cultures, she experiences different shades of life.

Love and break up

Feroza thinks of buying a secondhand car. In her search for a decent second hand car, she makes an appointment with David Press, a tall blue-eyed handsome guy of around twenty two. She buys the car but loses herself. Feroza later moves to a vacant bedroom in David's house. Living in the same house leads to their more intimate relations. It becomes a kind of living together. But, gradually, Feroza becomes conscious of her guilt. She thinks whether she is the same Feroza living in Lahore and studied in Convent of the Sacred Heart. She decides to have permission from her family to marry David. She writes a letter and also sends a photograph of David. It proves to be a bomb-blast in her family. Finally, it is decided that Zareen should go to USA and prevent Feroza from marrying David, a Jew. She is armed with all necessary instructions to face different sorts of situations. Zareen tries to explain Feroza that by marrying David, a non-Parsee she would cut herself off from her family and religion; she would never be allowed to enter the Parsi places of worship and never be allowed to attend the funeral rites of her grandmother or even the parents. But Feroza, who had once placed emphasis on religion and culture, can now think only about David and wishes to marry him. Feroza feels David is everything for her and their love cannot be changed forever.

Zareen decides to protect her daughter from him. To avoid further conflicts and to act wise, she gives her consent for their marriage but wants it to be an arranged marriage. She, patronizingly, explains Parsi wedding rituals and customs to David. By doing so, she wants to make David aware of how different their cultures are. When Zareen performs a ritual to cast out the spell of the evil eye that she feels afflicted on Feroza, David recoils in horror. Now he clearly understands that their cultures are quite different and he cannot adjust. His love for Feroza fades away and his feelings change. Her exoticism that once attracted him to her now frightens him. He wants to go out of her life. Fortunately, he gets another job in California and leaves Denver.

Self realization

Initially Feroza feels depressed over her break-up with David, but she determines to stay in America, instead of returning to Pakistan. She has experienced freedom in America and cannot live without it now. Feroza refuses to go back to her old conservative life of her Parsi community and Pakistan, for there the increasing fundamentalism and other constraints would crush her freedom that had become the centre of her happiness. She wants to lead her life without any interference or chains, and it is possible only remaining away from her family: "And privacy, she had come to realize, was one of the prime luxuries the opulence of the First World could provide, as well as the sheer physical space the vast country allowed each individual, each child, almost as a birthright" (American Brat 312). Feroza has learnt that, in future, she will not allow anyone to interfere in her personal matters, and she would marry a man whom she comes to love without noticing if he is a Parsi or not. Randhir Pratap Singh writes,

"Feroza has tasted freedom and she now cannot give it up. She decides to manage her life to suit her heart and pursue happiness in her own sweet way. She will marry a man whom she comes to like and love without bothering herself whether he is Parsi or of different faith. She has learnt her lesson and in future she will not allow anyone to meddle in her personal affairs. As for her religion, she is Parsi and she will continue to be Parsi. If the priests in Lahore and Karachi do not let her enter the fire temple, she will go to one in Bombay where there are so many Parsis that no one will know whether she is married to a Parsi or to a non – Parsi." (Bapsi Sidhwa, 83 – 84)

Conclusion

Feroza has become a confident and self-assertive girl. Her journey was from a historically traditional girl to a modern brat. An innocent conservative girl of the Parsi heritage, after expatriation, gets a modern look leaving past the cultural inhibition. She has dug out her self-identity through her immigrant experience. Though migration possesses a sense of loss, Bapsi Sidhwa, here portrays a positive picture for it. The immigrant experience of Feroza provides self actualization through cultural assimilation. Feroza undergoes the transitional dilemma and are constantly engaged in a search for identity or roots in a new land till she forgot her past roots and get assimilated to the culture of the adopted land. Feroza, thus assimilates the independence of mind and spirit and self-confidence offered by the new world.

This novel, even though appears to be the story of a simple Parsi girl trying to learn and live in a different culture from the one she was brought up in, is more significantly about the ways in which ethnicity creates, regulates and eventually decides our identity. The collective identity of the community to which the individual belongs shapes the interaction with the environment and the interaction in turn structures the identity of the community and the individual. Ethnic identity is more enduring than other identities; it is an individual's primary identity and is most often ascribed at birth. This identity strengthens as the individual grows up by feeding on the energy provided by 'we' and the 'other'. But the individual when subjected to experiences and freedom of a new world leads to self realization and attain a new identity.

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