

Migrating towards Identity: A Study of Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*

Pradipta Shyam Chowdhury
Assistant Professor of English
Raja Rammohun Roy Mahavidyalaya
Radhanagar, Hooghly

Abstract

The dream of going to America and adopting a first world lifestyle is a very common wish of the middle class families of the Indian sub-continent. The place appears to them as an alluring utopos and becomes the imaginary space, where all the problems of their present existence will be solved and they will be able to achieve all that are wanted for a sophisticated, tech-friendly and easy life.

Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat* also showcases such a decision of the Parsee family. Cyrus and Zareen Ginwalla plans to send their only daughter Feroza to U.S. to save her from the rising fundamentalisms in Pakistan, as the latter was reacting to the Parsi liberal lifestyle and in some way or other supporting the dictates of the mullahs. The Ginwallas thought that America will open her views and widen her thoughts. But Feroza approaches the country, experiences many social and cultural clashes and slowly but steadily assimilates it within her. Her relationship with an American Jew again disturbs her parents, who wanted their daughter to have a liberal outlook, within their created boundaries of religion and society. As inter-community marriage is not approved in the Parsi community, Feroza's parents break up their relation. But Feroza never returns back to her country and her community. She not only accepts America, but reinvents her religion from a broader perspective, which will ever remain in her and help her to find her own identity.

My paper attempts to show Feroza's struggle to approach America, her internalizing the American spirit and reinventing her religion in the context of adaptation of Parsi-Pakistani identity with that of the American to find her true self.

Key Words: Third World, Immigration, Inter-Community Marriage,

I

'*Ulfat Kee Nae Manzil Ko Chaley* (Embarked on a new mission of love)' (*An American Brat* 311). This line of Iqbal Banoo, quoted by Bapsi Sidhwa and uttered by Shashi, an Indian N.R.I, in *An American Brat* perhaps best sums up Sidhwa's motive of using the anxieties of migration as a powerful agency to establish the identity of a third world girl on a globalised matrix. Being the daughter of Cyrus and Zareen Ginwalla, Feroza had an aristocratic, affluent and liberal Parsi background, which gave her scope to go to U.S.A to spend a three months vacation and consequently get relief from the claustrophobic atmosphere of the fundamentalist Pakistan under the rule of General Zia¹, which was rooting into her and making her quite un-Parsi like in her attitude. Her mother complains: "She objected to my sleeveless Sari-blouse! Really this narrow-minded attitude touted by General Zia is infecting her, too." (*An American Brat* 10). Feroza was overwhelmed with the idea and she starts dreaming of America, "...the land of glossy magazines, of "Bewitched" and "star Trek," of rock stars and jeans..." (*An American Brat* 27) and her parents thought that the New World will broaden her outlook and attitude to life.

This particular attitude is almost common to all middle class Indian sub-continental parents, who want their wards to go to America, the New World, where liberalism is the practiced and once you are there, you will get rid of all social and cultural inhibitions and

puritanical dicta. Thus, Feroza is sent to the new world of America, under the guidance of her six years elder maternal uncle, Manek, who is studying there. Feroza approaches America with her third world attitude, the burdens of her culture and social norms, experiences several clashes starting from the immigration office of the airport to the Y.M.C.A boarding and the port authority bus terminal, and slowly but steadily adapts herself to the American lifestyle that becomes instrumental in asserting her own identity.

Moreover, what comes as a corollary to this experience is her understanding of the religion from its core, through her relationship with an American Jew Davis Press. Their relationship breaks up at the interference of her parents, who want their daughter to be liberal as far as their religious and social codes approve. Feroza's estrangement with David makes her realize that she is always carrying the true spirit of her religion with her, which will never leave her and this understanding leads her to find her true identity as Feroza, not the daughter of the Ginwallas, nor the Parsi Pakistani girl. Feroza assimilates the true American spirit with the essential Parsi ethos, which makes her 'an American brat' to her parents, but a true Parsi asserting her unique position amidst the multicultural² structure of America and she starts her new journey with finding her *Sudra*³ and the *Kusti*⁴ again and praying to *Ahura Mazda*⁵. She realizes: "There would never be another David, but there would be another men, and who knew, perhaps someday she might like someone enough to marry him." (*An American Brat* 317)

II

The two most important issues that come up with Feroza's approaching America are the immigration experience related to the process of her coming of age as a female immigrant and the issue of inter-community marriage in a land, which is supposedly free from all cultural, racial

and social boundaries. If the first is the immediate shock that helps her to adapt with the American lifestyle, the second has a more sustained effect, helping her to find the true meaning of her life, by reinventing her religious ethos within the American life.

In *An American Brat* Sidhwa poignantly portrays the impressions of Feroza in America. Adam L. Penenberg⁶ comments that the novel is “a sensitive portrait of how America appears to a new arrival” (quoted in *The Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa* 214). She not only shows the glitz and glamour of the first world but also the squalor and the dark sides of it in its dark entrails. Precisely, Feroza is shown growing up with America and this theme controls the story of the novel. It is not only the coming of age of a woman, but coming of age of a female immigrant⁷, who has the burden of the society with restrictive social and political ethos.

The transformation of an emigrant to an immigrant in the receiving country is always punctuated with shocks, which lessens the euphoria of approaching a new land. But these socio-political and cultural hindrances enable the entrant to get used to enculturation and socialization. Feroza’s initial wonder and good feeling seeing the organized and particular airport was shattered by the behaviour of the immigration officers, who sent her for a secondary inspection, being dissatisfied with her Urdu passport that opens from right to left. The secondary inspection crosses the border of decency and starts asking personal questions: how long she will stay here? Who is going to support her? How old is her uncle? And her hesitant answers bring them to the conclusion that she has actually come to her fiancée and will marry her to stay there permanently. They even brought out her see-through lacy pink night dress to prove their point. Feroza’s immediate reaction:” To hell with you and your damn country. I’ll go back!” (*An American Brat* 64) restrains them from going further. But at the same time, she sees the difference in the attitude of people in the Kennedy airport. Nobody is concerned about others,

none stares at her. Feroza, for the first time tastes liberty and gets her own space, which was quite unimaginable in Lahore. Moreover, as a woman from the Third World, She feels the release from the socio-religious burden in a new land, which marks the difference in the immigration experience of a woman from that of man. Unlike the latter's feeling of disempowerment that comes with the approaching in a new land with new cultural codes, the former has nothing to lose but their burdens, which used to hinder their freedom in their native country. The settling country appears to them almost as a new space to posit themselves with their newly found identity. This became a strong instrument for her staying back in the country instead of her three months vacation, proving the suspicion of the customs officer true.

After Feroza reaches America, the place appears to her as a real space. There is the city of New York, dazzling and colourful with well maintained streets, smooth traffic and all that a modern city can provide. Sidhwa writes:

And then there were climbing into a futuristic spaghetti of curving and incredibly suspended roads, mile upon looping mile of wide highway that weaved in and out of the sky at all angles so that sometimes they descended to the level of the horizon of lights in the distance that Manek told her was Manhattan, and sometimes they appeared to be aiming at the sky. (*An American Brat* 67)

The lunch at McDonalds astonishes her with the quality of food and service. The mesmerizing shopping malls and skinny manikins dressed in fashionable dresses struck the girl coming from Pakistan, who was reluctant to talk to boys of her age or objected to her mother wearing sleeveless sari-blouse.

But, Sidhwa does not end this with a surreal view of the country, but completes it with its ugly side. Sidhwa writes:

...on the Eighth avenue, they crossed Forty-second street to the Port authority bus terminal. The interior of the terminal appeared stark in the neon lighting, and from its squalor centre 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 shadier sidewalks of New York. (*An American Brat* 80)

Coming from a country like Pakistan, she has experienced stench and squalor, but this alien one, emitting out of a place, which was all bright and colourful in her vision, gives her a shock. Here, Feroza's experience can be equated with that of Bharati Mukherjee's Jasmine⁸, who was also shocked by the Florida swamps. With Manek Feroza comes across the pawn shops, dark video parlours, male prostitutes, and colourful transvestites and drug dealers, which was quite unbecoming with the city of the skyscrapers. The sexmanic at the YMCA bathroom shows that women are always the object of male gaze, be it Pakistan or U.S.A. If Feroza's native country wanted women to wear *Burqas*⁹ to save them from sudden sexual harassments, this new land, liberal in its truest sense, also fails to protect women from male voyeuristic perversions. Suman Bala in the essay "The Theme of Migration: An American Brat" writes:

While using the facilities in the women's bathroom (YMCA), Feroza feels uneasy, menaced, as if she were being observed by someone or something dangerous. As she raises her head to look into the mirror, she stands transfixed. A man's bloodshot eyes are staring at her, hideously examining her not as a woman but as a specimen of the female gender. (*The Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa* 216)

But the horrifying experience that she had was in the fire stair cases of the YMCA. On her way back from shopping, Feroza was misguided and she took the emergency fire exit stair cases, where she was locked for half an hour. Being totally detached, she experiences the real gloom of the city. The novelist writes:

America assumed a ruthless, hollow, cylindrical shape without beginning or end, without sunlight, an unfathomable concrete tube inhabited by her fear. She was sure something monstrous was crouched in the impervious shadows that patrolled this alien domain- ferocious sewer rats, a brutish Doberman- breathing softly, waiting patiently. (*An American Brat* 90)

All these bright and dark experiences of America matured Feroza's understanding of this new land. Feroza not only accepts and adjust with the country like her uncle Manek, but she gets into the very heart beats of the country's lifestyle. Sidhwa is here not an advocate for the first world life, but through Feroza, she tries to give a total view of the life of America, which is always an alluring utopos to the people of the sub-continent. Here, it becomes quite relevant to say that the novelist wrote this novel after she shifted to U.S.A. and her first hand experience of approaching the country has been artistically projected in Feroza's facing the brave new world.

III

Feroza's experiences in America have brought into focus the issue of inter-community marriage, which has been dealt by Bapsi Sidhwa in almost all her novels. As this particular act is considered as a sacrilege among the Parsis, one who commits this crime is made an outcast in the community. According to the chronicle of the *Kissah-i-Sanjan*¹⁰ (The Story of Sanjan) this rigidity is to protect the purity of their miniscule community and to stay loyal to their treaty

made by their ancestors, the settlers from Iran, to the Indian King, Yadav Rana, who gave them shelter in India. But with the passage of time, this law needed modification as it has come upon the Parsis, especially the new generation, as terrible bondage. Various Parsi writers have worked with this issue to foreground its utter meaninglessness. Perin Bharucha's *The Fire Worshippers*¹¹ rejects the concept of the ethnical purity, through the character of Nariman. Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow*¹² shows how the Parsi parents accept the inter-community marriage, being compelled by their children Brit and Dolly. Dolly refuses to change her decision of marrying a Muslim, who according to the Parsis is "... the historical enemies..." (*Kanga* 40).

Bapsi Sidhwa has treated the issues of Inter-community marriage skillfully. Unlike Bharucha and Kanga, Sidhwa has not raised her protest against this, nor does she advocate for the immediate eradication of this. But she has given hints for rethinking about this dead custom. From *The Crow Eaters*, she has started to underline this issue. The successful businessman, the shrewd master of the family, and obviously a patriarch Faredoon Junglewalla refuses to give permission to his son, Yazdi to marry an Anglo-Indian Rosy Watson. Sidhwa not only points to the traditional restrictions, but also gives a kind of rationale behind this stricture. Sidhwa comments through Faredoon:

I believe in some kind of tiny spark that is carried from parent to child, on through generations...a kind of inherited memory of wisdom and righteousness, reaching back to the times of Zarathustra, the Magi, the Mazdiasnians.

But what happens if you marry outside our kind? The spark so delicately nurtured, so subtly balanced, meets something totally alien and unmatched. Its precise balance is scrambled. It reverts to the primitive. (*The Crow Eaters* 128-129)

In *An American Brat* Sidhwa has brought this inter-community marriage not to criticize or to commend but has treated it in such a way, that it helps Feroza to understand the real meaning of her religion in a new land. Her break up with the American Jew David Press at the interference of her mother gives her life a new dimension. She firmly grabs the American life and mixes it with the essential teachings of Zoroastrianism. Feroza decides to stay back at America with a new realization:

As for her religion, no one could take it away from her; she carried its fire in her heart. If the priests in Lahore and Karachi did not let her enter the fire temple, she would go to one in Bombay where there were so many Parsees that no one would know if she was married to a Parsee or a non. (*An American Brat* 317)

The apparent ambivalence at the end of the novel brought in by Feroza's decision of not marrying David is actually Sidhwa's repudiation of the hollow and rigid strictures of the religion, substantiated by Feroza's realization of the true meaning of the holy fire, which purifies the heart and illumines the path ahead.

In spite of being westernized in attitude and modern in lifestyle, the Parsi society maintains a double standard in treating men and women. The *Ervad Dastur* or the high priest of the Parsis speaks for the purity of the *bonuk* (Parsi seed) and thinks that marrying outside the community is a kind of adultery. They have no such objection to a Parsi man marrying a non-Parsi woman. The children of such parents are entitled to the *Navjote*, but the mother is never allowed to enter the *Agiaary* (The Fire Temple). But when a Parsi woman marries outside her community, she is ex-communicated. Indira Bhatt in her essay "Journey Towards Freedom: A Study of Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*" comments: "Surprisingly the Parsi community that

prides itself as westernized and liberated community is in fact not so liberal...The Parsis are fundamentalists to the core and the priest are not prepared to move with the times even when the community is dwindling.” (93) Sidhwa here plans to show that the rigid Parsis and the fundamentalist Muslims of Pakistan belong to the same paradigm. Both denies freedom and the individual right. The Ginwalla’s plan to wipe out the puritanical rubbish out of Feroza’s head becomes hollow, when they consider her a ‘Brat’ for being too much modern.

In *An American Brat*, Feroza’s decision of marrying an American Jew makes Zareen anxious about her daughter’s future. “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” (*An American Brat* 289). This fear was instrumental in Zareen to thwart their marriage, though she finds David an agreeable suitor for Feroza. She tells her daughter: “If you can’t knock him out with sugar, slug him with honey” (*An American Brat* 272). Zareen as a dutiful Parsee and the member of the respectable Ginwalla family cannot deny the rules of her community, but as a mother wants her daughter to marry the boy she loves. She even feels that the voice, raising against these lifeless strictures of the community by the new generation Parsis, is correct. Sidhwa through the voice of fifteen year old Bunny places this protest and the other adolescent members support it. Zareen thinks:

Perhaps the teenagers in Lahore were right. The Zoroastrian *Anjuman*¹³ 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 (*An American Brat* 288)

But the rigid codes ingrained in her consciousness along with the warning letter from the Parsi organizations from Bombay and Karachi dissuade Zareen from going beyond their social lines and consequently she embarks on an apparently naïve mission of breaking up the relationship of David and Feroza. And this she does by bringing into focus the unique and sometimes peculiar customs of their community, namely their marriage rites. Zareen says:

We'll have the *Madasara*¹⁴ ceremony first. You'll plant a mango tree. It's to ensure fertility. May you have many children as the tree bears mangoes. In all ceremonies we mark your foreheads with vermillion, give you envelopes with money, hang garlands round your necks, and give you sugar and coconuts. They are symbols of blessings and good luck. (*An American Brat* 297)

The community and its custom, which was so revered by them, have been shown from a different angle by Zareen to stop this adultery. Sidhwa here obliquely suggests that this interference is not only to save the purity, but also to maintain their social position in their community. Cyrus, Feroza's father wants her daughter to mix freely with the boys of her age, but is worried about Feroza getting engaged with some non- Parsi boy. Similarly the maverick Manek tries to assimilate with the U.S. lifestyle only to get some economic and social mileage. But when it comes to the question of marriage, he marries a docile Parsi girl Aban, to whom divorce is the most heinous crime. Thus, the unique cultural practices that constitute the identity of the very community, which are so revered by the members are represented with quaintness. This strategic presentation of the cultural practices both with positive and negative nuances are not only to maintain the essential identity of the community but also to wield the power over the social modes that build up the identity of the community. What become quite apparent from these attitudes, projected by Sidhwa, are the domination of the social ideology, which exploits the

community codes and religious rites to perpetrate their control over the individuals, the componential units of the collective identity of the community.

But Feroza listens to her heart. She refuses to go back to her roots and starts finding her new route in the new world. She exercises her immigrant position as an agency that empowers her, helps her to internalize the American life, ignoring her family's labeling her as 'American brat' and tries to find the spirit of liberty, her personal space, which will enable her to carry the pure fire in her and 'embark on a new mission of love'.

Notes:

1. Muhammed Zia-ul-Haq (Aug12, 1924- Aug 17, 1988) was the general officer, who served as the sixth President of Pakistan from 1978 until his death in 1988. Zia rejected Bhutto's philosophy of "Food, cloth and Shelter" and wanted Islam to be the base of Pakistan.
2. Multiculturalism points to communities having multiple cultures. Descriptively, it means a cultural diversity and is applied to the demographic structures of a particular place. Normatively, it gives stress on the interaction and communication between different cultures and centers on diversity and cultural uniqueness.
3. It is an undergarment made of pure white muslin and used by the Zoroastrians like a slip next to the skin. There is a small pocket at the V of the neck, which is believed to be the repository of good deeds. At the *Navjote* (Ceremony of initiation into the Zoroastrian faith) ceremony the child is first given the *Sudra*.

4. *Kusti* is the sacred thread woven from seventy-two strands of wool, girdled around the waist three times, worn over the *Sudra*. It is believed that girdled with this around the loin, the Parsi men and women serve the lord.
5. *Ahura Mazda* is the God to the Parsis. He is also known as *Athuramazda*, *Aramazd*, *Hourmazd*, *Hurmuz* and *Azzand*. It is the *Avestan* name for a divinity of the old Iranian religion. He was proclaimed God by Zoroaster. The Word *Ahura* means 'light' and *Mazda* means 'wisdom'. So, *Ahura Mazda* is the god of light and wisdom.
6. Please refer to Adam L. Penenberg, Review of *An American Brat*, *The New York Times Book Review*, January 16, 1994.
7. Please refer to Edit Villareal, "Feroza Goes Native," *The Washington Post*, December 16, 1993.
8. Please refer to Bharati Mukherjee. *Jasmine*. Delhi: Penguin, 1990. Print.
9. *Burqa* is head to toe covering black dress worn by conservative Muslim women in the Asian and more precisely in the Indian sub-continental countries. It has a net in front of the head covering piece to see through.
10. *Kissah-i-Sanjan* is a chronicle, which gives an account of the Zoroastrians settlers in India. At the end, we get the signature of the Parsi poet Bahman Kaikobad.
11. Please refer to Perin Bharucha, *The Fire Worshippers*. Bombay: Strand, 1968. Print.
12. Please see Firdaus Kanga. *Trying to Grow*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publishers, 1990. Print.

13. *Anjuman* in *Urdu* means a gathering or association. In the Parsi context, *Anjuman* is the plural of *najm*, which means star. So, *Anjuman* denotes a group of stars. Now the Parsis use *Anjuman* as party, meetings or gatherings, like its *Urdu* rendering.
14. The Parsi ceremony that takes place before the marriage. It resembles to the Bengali custom of *Gatra Haridra* or the application of turmeric paste on the bride and groom.

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* **Bio Note:** Pradipta Shyam Chowdhury is working as the Assistant Professor of English at Raja Rammohun Roy Mahavidyalaya, Radhanagar, and Hooghly. His area of interest is Third World Feminist Studies.