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DEPICTION OF CULTURAL IDENTIFICATION CRISIS IN AN AMERICAN BRAT

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ABSTRACT

Bapsi Sidhwa, born into an eminent Parsi family, in Karachi is an important and unavoidable voice in the world of commonwealth fiction. She belongs to Parsi Zoroastrian community, a distinctive minority which left Iran for South Asia to avoid religious hounding. The Parsis are the followers of Prophet Zarathustra and are known as Zoroastrians. Her novels are always different from one another in subject as well as the technique. Since she equally belongs to Punjab-Pakistan and Parsi, there is always a variety of themes in her writings. The Partition crisis, expatriate experience, the Parsi milieu, social idiosyncrasies of the small minority community, the theme of marriage, women's problems and problems of migration. She treats all these themes with ease and as a novelist she testimonies the situations in an auto-biographical note. She is a shrewd observer of human society and a teller of stories. She is possibly Pakistan's premium English language novelist. There are a lot of themes in her novels which resist any one-dimensional analysis. Most of the literary criticism on her, however, veers round the theme of migration, ethnicity, feminism and use of comic mode in her novels.

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An American Brat is set up against a very disturbing journey of the Protagonist Feroza, replete with the complex negotiations underpinning the gendered, Pakistani migration westward and beyond. The Indian-Pakistani migratory experience to America is well narrated. The eponymous protagonist is sixteen year old Feroza Ginwalla. She is the only daughter of a wealthy Parsee family in Lahore, whose behaviour is the topic of much concern for her parents. The novel is set against the austere backdrop of Parsi culture.

Zareen, Feroza's mother feels that she is 'becoming more and more backward everyday'. Troubled by her conservative behaviour, the perfect antidote according to Zareen is to send Feroza to America. Manek, her uncle, who has been studying at MIT for nearly three years, would take care of her. They originally decide to send her for three or four months, believing that travel will broaden her attitude, so that her puritanical thinking would be abolished out of her head. Despite many objections from her close knit family and especially her paternal grandmother, Feroza embarks on her journey to the promised land that would cleanse her of the pseudo fanatic sensibilities. The initial shock, cultural and behavioural, includes the institutionalised paranoia of the Department of Homeland Security, who are convinced that Feroza's uncle is actually her

husband. The other two horrifying incidents that Feroza encounters during her stay are at the YMCA in New York, and the one where a woman pushes her out of a malfunctioning lift into pitch dark, seemingly never ending flight of stairs. However she begins to adapt and flourish to an independent girl with the guidance of Manek. Three months becomes three years, as she takes a college course in hotel management in Idaho, and then a degree at the University of Denver. Here she meets friends and budding lovers. She returns home for a brief amount of days and, the denouement sees Feroza fall in love with a fellow Jewish student from whom she buys a car. They become engaged much to the repulsion of Zareen, who embarks on a mission, not to send her away, as she did at the beginning, but to bring her back home. Unable to cope with his stubborn, potential mother-in-law, David ends the relationship, leaving Feroza to chart a new path in what has, for now in any case, become her adopted diasporic 'home'. Theoretically anyway, postcolonial migration can be viewed as inevitability in a transnational world of porous borders. Feroza's association is not her own made. The first one is because of her mother who wants to throw the "rubbish puritanical thinking", from her mind. There are myriad contradictions in this approach, the most evident of which is the reinforcement of disruptive binary oppositions; colonial essentialisms recycled in a Parsee, postcolonial context. There lies another paradox, the gender politics of Feroza's family and community.

'I'll tell you one thing, though.'

Cyrus twisted his neck to follow Zareen's restless passage across the room.

'Zia or no Zia. I'd much prefer she stay narrow-minded and decently dressed than go romping about looking fast and loose.'

These are Feroza's father's words to his wife as part of their deliberations on whether or not they should send their daughter to America. Cyrus's anxieties are instructive. He ultimately approves of his wife's plan because he had discovered Feroza, ostensibly about to start a relationship with a non-Parsee, because 'he would not have his daughter fool around with Muslim boys'.

Feroza's parents are not opposed to conservatism, but disruptive play of identity which disturbs essentialist beliefs is not entertained. Feroza must not challenge, whether she is 'here' or 'there'. Her journey is prescribed, and associated with a particular kind of 'emancipation'. Feroza's migratory experience is itself therefore, interpolated, rather than fashioned out of the deconstruction of such an interpellation. Her relationship with America, as the locus of her diasporic 'self' before she leaves and when she arrives, is a necessarily ambiguous one:

"Feroza slipped under her quilt fully dressed, her eyes wide open, her mind throbbing with elation. She was going to America! She found it difficult to believe. She repeated it to herself. 'I'm going to America. I'm going to America!' until her doubts slowly ebbed and her certainty, too, caught the rhythm of her happiness". Feroza, despite an estranged love affair with David Press and general feeling of depression, prefers the struggle for freedom and self-fulfillment at the U. S. A. instead of the settled family life at Lahore. Bapsi Sidhwa stresses the fact that the expatriate experiences go a long way in changing the protagonist's attitudes. Feroza chooses to be an American Brat rather than a conservative Parsi. All the facets of Feroza are revealed beautifully.

When Feroza announces that she wants to marry David, her family in Pakistan is both agitated and shocked. The mother Zareen flies to Denver to dissuade Feroza from taking a step that would lead her being ex-communicated and expelled from the faith. The parents think that such a marriage would bring shame to the family honour. The family's opposition to Feroza's impending marriage represents the predominant traditionalist view of the Parsi community to such inter-community marriages as these. However, the author depicts the growing discontent with such ancient traditions among the younger generation of Parsis. Having moved into a separate house, she gets the company of two American girls. Their friendship helps her shed social inhibitions.

The liberating anonymity she had discovered within moments of her arrival at Kennedy Airport, when no one had bothered to stare at her and the smoky-eyed American she was talking to, still exhilarated her. In Lahore these contacts would have been noticed and would have drawn censorious comment.

Experiencing the stimulating climate of freedom in America, she felt able to do anything. To return to her home is appalling to her. She loses her self-identity as a Parsi and wishes to be in America.

Heterosexual desire enthuse Feroza. The power of culture in which she finds herself continues to absorb her, and she proceeds to distance herself from the potency of immediate ties to family and native culture. From one perspective- something of a traditional, mythically American perspective- Feroza's continuity with the archetypal America of independence, individualism, open vista, and energetic improvisation becomes stronger as the novel progresses. *An American Brat* is a tale of continuity. From another perspective, Feroza is almost lost to extended family, to her religion, to modes of traditional behaviour, to native place and culture as she is "swallowed" by the seductive giant of America. *An American Brat* is a tale of rupture. It is very American in all means.

Thus, Feroza's stay in America certainly affects her fundamental attitude. She journeys through her own community's Parsi culture, her country, its Islamic culture and the Western culture of America. The orthodoxy of Feroza's community becomes a big hurdle on the path of her opposed marriage to David Press.

#### **Indira Bhatt rightly puts it**

"Surprisingly the Parsi community that prides itself as westernized and liberated community is in fact not so liberal. Bapsi Sidhwa portrays Parsi community's traditional dictum of double standards - one for the man, another for the woman especially when it is the question of inter-faith marriage. Man's inter-faith marriage is acceptable and his wife of the other faith and their children are accepted into the Parsi fold. But if a woman marries a non-Parsi, she is an outcast and debarred from community and even from their temple-Agiari".

Sidhwa takes a hard look at the way frontier violence takes a hold of the ethnic self and causes inevitable assimilation. But Feroza finally does not blend in despite the "closing of the frontier", the West still represents to the "typical" American life- a "Mythical America". In analysis, her fate remains in the alienated margins of 'home'. Her dalliances and inter-religious marriages leave her a pariah, where her Jewish fiancée suddenly discovers his spiritual connection and also abandon her:

"If she flew and fell again, could she pick herself up again? Maybe one day she'd soar to that self-contained place from which there was no falling, if there was such a place".

Zareen wishes that David were a Parsi. In fact she finds him suitable for Feroza but the only problem is that he is a Jew. At this stage she becomes Sidhwa's mouthpiece and expresses her own unease with the ancient tradition. She begins to understand the logic behind the opposition of the young Parsis to the prohibition of interfaith marriages. Her idea about David begins to change and she finds him admirable and appealing. At the same time she is fully conscious that such a marriage would deprive her daughter of her faith, heritage, family and community. Zarin recalls the warning from the Athoran Mandal and the Notice from the Bombay Zoroastrian Jashan Committee. The exotic charm that Feroza has evoked in David's mind is gradually fading. Sidhwa has created the character of David to show that in practice, the infusion of two different ancient religions, traditions, and culture namely Zoroastrianism and Judaism is rather difficult.

But for Feroza there are other Protagonists also in the novel. Manek is one such strong character who is a globalised, hybrid migrant. Manek's gender ensures a privileged status for him in both Pakistan and USA.

Being a migrant, he realises his dreams, aspirations and his path to success. Here is why Manek feels that the West is always improving and the others are backward.

'That's right. That's what a free and competitive economy in a true democracy demands.

That's why the country is prosperous. That's why the Third World is so backward and poor.'

This refrain is repeated throughout the novel. 'Civilisation' and 'progress', as differentiating West from East, are expressed purely in economic terms. And it appears this is the contingency of the hybridised identity that Manek enacts so successfully. Hybridity becomes an adjunct to the transnational flow of people and labour in the service of the undisputed might of American capitalism. To this end,

Manek's journey begins at MIT and ends at NASA, working in an extremely lucrative post. He can effortlessly perform both American and Parsi identities, and benefits from both. Unlike Feroza, he makes the

politically expedient choice of returning 'home' to be married to a Parsi woman, relaying the occidental wonders of the 'American Dream' to all his relatives.

When at work, Feroza is shocked to find that he has adopted, or been given, the name Mike:

'The people I have to deal with find it hard to remember Manek. It's too foreign, it makes them uneasy. But I am one of the guys if I'm Manek's gender gives him an advantage over Feroza in both sets of cultural formations, spaces and ideologies. Feroza's position in the American metropolis highlights a common thread between the 'diasporic home' and the 'real home'. Her status at her own home is an alien sort, untenable because she represents a type of miscegenation in America which she is more comfortable with.

Her status at 'home' is now untenable as she represents the spectre of miscegenation, where her transgression threatens to expose time-honoured Parsi taboos of marrying outside the religion for women. The discourse of faith, in this and many other instances, is employed to essentialise what is simply a desire to control female bodies and sexuality. Feroza's position in the migratory space is arguably no better in the end. Her performance of identity to destabilise racially motivated constructions, like the Parsi daughter/American girlfriend cultural mediation she enacts between her Mother and David, is jarring and effective in some ways. But ultimately, such a route to agency and success in the metropolis is contingent on gender once again, with Manek, the main, *male* beneficiary of the American Dream. As a postcolonial woman, Feroza becomes a repository for the exotic, her transnational romance with David figuring as a means by which the white, middle-class American male can consume difference, and then discard it before moving on to the new pastures that are offered to him as a global consumer, a domestic tourism that does not involve the inconveniences of travel. Feroza's diasporic experience as a postcolonial migrant and woman leaves her floating in between the contingencies of both her Pakistani 'home' and global (American) world.

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