



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 7. Issue.3. 2020 (July-Sept)

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

**BAPSI SIDHWA'S AN AMERICAN BRAT, EXPLORES CROSS-CULTURALISM AND
CULTURAL IDENTITY**

Dr. PRIYAMVADA SINGH

Dept. of English & M.E.L.

University of Allahabad, Allahabad, India.



Article information

Received: 18/07/2020

Accepted: 25/08/2020

Published online: 01/09/2020

doi: [10.33329/ijelr.7.3.132](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.7.3.132)

ABSTRACT

An American Brat makes Bapsi Sidhwa speak for her ideologies clearly and evidently. It's a story where the writer tries to elaborate concerns related to 'Nativism', 'Rootlessness', 'Ethnic Anxiety', and 'Cultural Clash'. To understand it further we shall investigate a little more into the horizon of culture and try to understand what it means by cross-culture or cross-cultural identity. 'Cross Culturalism', the term defines itself as the mixing of cultures or hybrid of various cultures. This intermixing of cultures gives rise to various identities, one of them being 'Cultural Identity'. Sidhwa employing Feroza explores the different aspects of cultural identity and how can more than one culture proliferate well into the identities of expatriates. One's identity is sure to get altered once our cultural atmosphere changes. The same happens to Feroza in the novel, she gets altered as a person, and she is transformed when she arrives in America. Though the process of her transformation is not instant, she does have her share of attachments to her motherland. Time and again reminding her of her family that she is supposed to distance from, but the nostalgia does not stop her from admiring the first world charm that she was about to administer. *The novel is also a representative of* the concept of identity, both personal and cultural.

Keywords: Culture, Cultural Identity, Cross Culturalism, Hybrid, Ethnic Anxiety.

Introduction

Contemporary globalization and postcolonial migration processes result in the emergence of dynamic transnational communities that both maintain lively connections to home societies and other satellite co-ethnic communities while, at the same time, engage the places of settlement in mutually transformative ways. To sum up 'culture' in simple words of Nana Ayebea Clarke :

"On the subject of "Cultural Identity" I would like to begin by quoting from Aloys Ohaegbu's theory of culture. Culture is vital to any living and growing human society within a specific cultural group as food and water is to a plant."

"In other words, Culture is the Oxygen of Life!"

As we begin to define 'Culture', we may come across plenty of definitions elaborating on its meaning. Going by the dictionary 'culture' is claimed to be 'the arts and the other manifestations of human intellectual

achievement regarded collectively' yet another meaning maintains that it is 'the ideas, customs, and social behavior of a particular people or society'. Thus we may claim that culture is the social behavior and norms found in human societies. Culture is considered a central concept in anthropology, encompassing the range of phenomena that are transmitted through social learning in human societies.

If we elaborate on these theories we find that 'culture is an extensions', an extension of our very personal self, our basic ideologies, our parameters of living, our standards of believing, and it is everything that we are made of or supposed to be made of. When circulated beyond our very own individuality this learning gives birth to some culture. And this culture when propagated for a very long period it becomes a tradition, which indeed forms the society, and when people take the job to scrutinize what is happening around them and try to investigate that culture it becomes literature. So yes these three are almost interlinked. And you cannot differentiate between them until and unless you have a broader understanding of what is leading where. There can be no mathematical formula to understand a culture, because of its vast comprehensive nature, it is almost all or whole in itself, every minute detail about an individual, starting from his appearance to his mannerism, his attitude combined with his aptitude calls for a whole culture.

There's not much room for validation of facts when debating as to what stands right or wrong concerning any particular culture, because it's not accurately notified and since we do not have any legal documents by which we can limit the parameters of any culture, the chase remains futile. As perceived in common understanding it's an extension of ones' self and so it varies from time to time, place to place, and person to person. One can neither defend nor criticize one culture over the other since it will then be a very subjective opinion of a very objective entity. The moment one may settle for some answer, the answer will itself negate its existence. Adhering to the theory of deconstruction, that when you believe you have arrived, you may realize that it's not the actual destination that you were searching for, the findings are in complete contrast to the objectives. So ultimately one never arrives and this is what culture stands for. Its beauty lies in not arriving not being contained not being limited. Its versatility and objectivity breathe life in it. Because one can always be right today but not relevant tomorrow, present here but absent somewhere, welcomed now but discarded later. So what we may infer is that all this shifting and play leads to a huge world full of variety and colour.

The works of expatriate novelists investigate the cultural differences, cultural displacement, and their impact. The uprooted immigrants face varied situations, problems of rejection, and acceptance. If accepted, the problem may be of adjustment, coping with anxiety, monotony, disappointment, and isolation, and if not the discourse goes endless

On elaborating few terms in context to the diaspora, we encounter a word often repeated i.e. 'rejection': The works of expatriate writers depict the effect of cultural up-rootedness and show that the never-ending experiences of such social rejection are central. Social rejection is when a group of people decides, to reject one or more individuals from participating in their group. Social rejection can be conducted in many different ways. Sometimes people out rightly reject individuals by telling them they are not wanted. Sometimes, there is a potentially more cruel rejection that is not easy for the individuals to accept as there is always a natural sentiment of the need for acceptance in them. Next in the same list stands 'Loneliness': A psychological state where an immigrant experiences a strong sense of emptiness and loneliness. It is more than just a desire for some company of another individual. It is a feeling of being detached, disconnected, and unable to associate with others leading to a state of depression and crises. Feelings of estrangement or isolation from the world are common amongst those who experience loneliness.

To understand it further we shall investigate a little more into the horizon of culture and try to understand what it means by cross-culture or cross-cultural identity. 'Cross Culturalism', the term defines itself as the mixing of cultures or hybrid of various cultures. This intermixing of cultures gives rise to various identities, one of them being 'Cultural Identity'. It is important to mention some sociological concepts of identity to understand cultural identity. Culture is acquired and passed over to generations and includes the beliefs and value system of a society. Culture has been described as a feature that is shared and binds people

together into a community. Identity is the totality of one's perception of self, or how we, as individuals, view ourselves as unique from others. Racial, cultural, and ethical identities form a core part of one's personality. Identity keeps changing with development at both personal as well as a social level along with migration and acculturation.

The culture that we always speak of is the heritage passed on to us from generations, and we indeed pass it on further. So we can understand that it is nothing theoretical but social and psychological. We not only are born in some culture but live that culture, it is visible in our actions, our speech, our way of being, our personality i.e. our identity. It is an extension and a representation of the culture we ally with. When we talk of anything such as Cross Culturalism, each one of us today wants to become global. Global, because it is an age of experiment, newness, and of being international. We cannot imagine of globalization just by sitting back in our confined and warm homes. Whether we will or not, we cannot deny the truth that, if not now, then never.

According to Rushdie, the migrants arrive from the native land and the migrants run from pillar to post crossing the boundaries of time, memory and history, carrying with them the vision and dream of returning to their homeland as and when the migrants like and find fit to return, and in this process they tend to create their imaginary homelands:

“Exiles or emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back [...] [But when we look back, because of our “physical attention” from India, we] “create fiction” [...] “imaginary homelands, India of the mind” (Rushdie 10).

On a similar note Stuart Hall in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1994), states that:

“It is an axiomatic truth that the migrant's dreams are futile and it would not be possible to return to the homeland. The longing for the homeland is countered by the desire to belong to the new home, so the migrant remains a creature of the edge, the peripheral man” (222-237).

One should not advocate the adoption of some different cultures but do appreciate the will to understand something beyond our own. No one can negate the comfort that one's own country, home, and culture provides but still holding a grudge and a rigid view towards others is not commendable. We need to understand the fact that if we do not change our perception we will certainly be lagging. Considering Darwin's theory of the survival of the fittest we need to move with the pace of the changing scenario to obtain a relevant place in the world.

A person who visualizes the world without any boundaries is ready to go on an expedition, no matter what he faces, will for sure bring something new back along with him to add to his own culture. When we talk of culture being crossed we assume, to lose something, we always are afraid of some subtraction. The psychological trauma dawns over our minds and we fail to cherish the vibrant variety that the change has brought along with it. We often associate with a term called 'Hyphenated-Identity', why do we always have to see it as something being subtracted, why cannot we look at it as an addition to our experiences, an encounter with some new and different culture, an enhancement of our personality, a unique civilization that we were, or are, or can be a part of.

The term 'Cross- Culturalism' may sound new but it is as ancient as human civilization, if we go back into history we will certainly find that almost every country has been a store house of various different cultures. For example India has witnessed not one or two but several cultures, bonding and becoming one, the Hindu culture, the Parsi culture the culture of the Mughals and the British. They have all contributed something or the other to the land, politically, socially, morally, economically, and culturally eventually to the identity of Indians. We cannot deny that if the country has lost something to the foreign civilizations, they undoubtedly have learnt too.

“The question ‘What is your cultural identity?’ is unanswerable.” Homi K. Bhabha

Answering to the question of Klaus Stierstorfer, Homi K. Bhabha talks about key ideas in his work.

“This is a very interesting, rather reflective question. So let me start with what you say at the very head

of the question, as my being a specialist on cultural “misfits.” I think I would phrase it somewhat differently. I think what is interesting about culture itself is that it is often in its most interesting manifestations in a state of the “misfit”; to fit the different bits or parts of a particular cultural apparatus or experience together always creates a problem because the parts do not necessarily form a whole. And people regret that (e Pluribus Unum). Wouldn't it be great if everybody, whatever cultures, all fit together in one big whole? But it seems to me that the most interesting and most important ethical and political problems have emerged precisely because cultures are not a seamless whole. There are discordant elements; there are divisive elements; there are divergent elements.”

Discussion: Culture Contributing to Expatriate Identity

An American–Pakistani novelist of Gujarati Parsi descent, born on August 11, 1938, in Karachi, to Gujarati Parsi Zoroastrian parents Peshotan and Tehmina Bhandara, Bapsi Sidhwa describes herself as a "Punjabi-Parsi-Pakistani". Sidhwa is Pakistan's leading diasporic writer. She currently resides in Houston, US. Her works speak for her ideologies clearly and evidently. Although Sidhwa speaks four languages, she made a conscious decision to write in English, partly due to the increased probability of worldwide exposure to issues that concerned her within the subcontinent. At that time there were no English language books published in Pakistan, so after Sidhwa finished writing the novel, she published it herself as *The Bride*. The novel was critically acclaimed for its forceful style and its undeniable ability to speak eloquently of human warmth amid horrible circumstances. She received the Pakistan National Honours of the Patras Bokhari. In 1993 she published her novel, *An American Brat*, a reflection on the confusing friction of how different cultures are imposed upon a Pakistani girl in the United States of America.

An American Brat is a story where the writer tries to elaborate concerns related to 'Nativism', 'Rootlessness', 'Ethnic Anxiety', and 'Cultural Clash'. In an online interview to Daily Times August 2016 she said:

"Feroza is closest to me and my views" about the identity issues of Pakistani Parsi immigrants to the US, their lifestyles, and their culture."

An American Brat is a work of fiction that stands true as a representative of the whole concept of diaspora, involving all the major concerns related to the subject. Discovering and disclosing what it takes to become an immigrant and how does it surface when realized both internally and externally. The novel is also a representative of the concept of identity, both personal and cultural.

Bapsi Sidhwa seems to register the fact that the personal identity of any individual is a result of his/her cultural upbringing. The seed grows good or bad depending on its surrounding, the climate around, the atmosphere provided, and is it being nourished well? It never can germinate to become strong in a vacuum, the same goes for people. Bapsi Sidhwa made a very conscious effort to elaborate this thought at the very beginning of the novel. This whole idea is well presented by Zareen, as the novel starts. Whereas a mother her concerns grow for her daughter Feroza. The anxiety of what would Feroza's personality become? Given the terrible, conservative, and political atmosphere of Pakistan, she was being brought up in.

The story opens with an event of Zareen being restless for her daughter's upbringing in a society where no modernity lies. Zareen discusses with Cyrus, her husband about Feroza's mind-set being narrowed.

"She's becoming more and more backward every day" (Sidhwa 9).

Zareen continues to elaborate, explaining to her husband that their daughters' behavior is not appropriate, her husband suggests it might be the socio-political environment that has influenced Feroza's behavior. Zareen further mentions that Feroza has even started to object the way her mother dressed:

"In the car, she said: 'Mummy, please don't come to school dressed like that.' She objected to my sleeveless sari-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." (Sidhwa 10)

Zareen feels considerably bothered by the prevailing social and political situations, systems, and practices in Pakistan and their disastrous impacts on her young daughter's mental development and shares her

fear with her husband.

“Could you imagine Feroza cycling to school now? She’d be a freak! Those *goondas* would make vulgar noises and bump into her, and the *mullahs* would tell her to cover her head. Instead of moving forward, we are moving backward. What I could do in ’59 and ’60, my daughter can’t do in 1978! Our Parsee children in Lahore won’t know how to mix with Parsee kids in Karachi or Bombay” (Sidhwa 11)

Thereafter, she talks about the image of a woman in her culture and nation where fundamentalism had made the existence of respectable and liberal identity almost impossible. Propelled by such circumstances, Zareen decides to send her daughter off to America where supposedly she might get exposed to the open modern culture, which may induce frankness and confidence in her:

"I think we should send Feroza to America for a short holiday. ...I think Feroza must get away, ...just for three or four months. Manek can look after her. Travel will broaden her outlook, get this puritanical rubbish out of her head." (Sidhwa 13)

Cultural identity has been very seriously observed in the novel. Sidhwa emphasizes that the culture of any geographical place on earth shapes an individual's mental and physical framework. No matter where does one comes from, the mental framework is bound to alter as soon as the person comes in contact with a diverse culture. It behaves like an infection that catches up quickly and lasts long.

Cultural identity if observed is a feeling of association to a certain group or community. It is a certain amount of ethical rules and principles, passed us down by that very tradition that we belong to. Which is a longer run, turns out to form our identity. But what if the whole cultural scenario around us gets changed, the people, custom, habits, all get modified or challenged? The ethics that we believed in so far get diluted. How long would we be able to stand loyal to our old beliefs and the identity that was derived from the same?

One's identity is sure to get altered once our cultural atmosphere changes. The same happens to Feroza in the novel, she gets altered as a person, she is transformed when she arrives in America. Though the process of her transformation is not instant, she does have her share of attachments to her motherland. Time and again reminding her of her family that she is supposed to distance from, but the nostalgia does not stop her from admiring the first world charm that she was about to administer.

“Feroza hugged the adventure of her travel to America to herself throughout the flight. As she hurtled through space, she became conscious also of the gravitational pull of the country she was leaving behind.”(Sidhwa 52)

Her acknowledgment of the fact that she has arrived in a different world started from day one. The postcolonial impact is strongly visible in the novel. The traumatic experience with the immigration authorities on the airport, which went so badly that she lost her control and blurted out:

“To hell with you and your damn country. I’ll go back.”(Sidhwa 64)

This incident announced an initial shattering of her hopes and instantly made her feel low, as she still believed in the concept of "izzat" that was taught back home in Pakistan. But soon Manek makes her understand that the two countries are different in all and every aspect, which she needs to understand and follow if, desires to be an American in America:

“And you’d better forget this honour-shonor business. Nobody bothers about that here.”(Sidhwa 66)

Feroza learned her lessons quickly and understood the ways she needs to behave. She was so eager to be a part of the first world, to mimic the superiors that she could not stop admiring and appreciated the luxury, comfort, privileges that the land offered:

"After a leisurely hamburger lunch at McDonald's, which left Feroza struck with wonder at the quick service and the quantities of fries, ketchup, and the ice in the Coke, Manek hauled Feroza off on a tour of New York ." (Sidhwa 72)

Feroza went to Bloomingdale's. It was like entering a surreal world...she had never seen such luxuriant textures or known the vibrant gloss of true colors."(Sidhwa 73)

Feroza grew fond of the country and decided to stay. She realized soon, she had to make sure she has tasted all. Though conscious of the fact she was away from home, her parents, her family, but instead of feeling bad she found her heart filled with pleasures:

"They were, all of them far away from home, Feroza reflected, and yet she was happy."(Sidhwa 108)

Her decision to educate herself in America was an initial step towards her transformation. It initialized the process of change; the altering of the cultural identity she was initially born to. It required some effort to convince, the family back home in Pakistan, to let her have her chance to explore, however, she managed to succeed:

"What could she expect to see of the country or imbibe of its progressive and stimulating culture, in a couple of months? How could she discover the opportunities and choices available to her in such a short time."(Sidhwa 119)

The family back home, Zareen and Cyrus admitted to the growth of their daughter, and thus began a new adventure for Feroza, her journey to be a part of America.

"The call involved not only Feroza's education and the development of her personality but also her induction into self-sufficient, industrious, and independent way of American life."(Sidhwa 119)

Bapsi Sidhwa has very carefully outlined Feroza's character, she has not missed any instance to reveal to the readers about how did this young girl from Pakistan, all simple and docile, occupied by faith and traditions, a girl who objected to her mother's dressing and found it inappropriate, a girl so involved in the government politics that she even carried the poster of Bhutto with her, gets transformed into an American brat.

As the plot of the novel proceeds, the characters become hybrids. The word 'hybrid' means 'mixture' of the two or more things. Thus, hybridity is the concept that highlights the process of mixing up two different races and cultures. Homi K. Bhaba, in his work, supports the idea that hybridity has been present in all the cultures and no culture is pure as it has always been influenced by the intervening cultures and traditions. The same element of hybridity is apparent in Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*. Manek, Feroza, and Zareen visit America and willingly mix up with the host culture. As the plot progresses, Feroza very well adapts to the American social setup.

All through the novel, Sidhwa depicts the story stressing the expatriate experiences that changed and shaped the attitude and the psyche of the young girl. The novel also deals with quite a sensitive issue and societal concerns of inter-community marriage more importantly of a Parsi girl. However, the story does not present the girl as a rebellion who goes against society and the religion to marry a person she loves. Instead, it presents gradually adapting and acceptance of the American culture by the girl though.

American culture, initially Feroza gets baffled with it but she gradually goes self-confident and individual. As a student in a small western town, Feroza's perceptions of America, her homeland, and herself begin to alter. When she falls in love with and wants to marry a Jewish- American, her family is aghast. She knew they would be very upset, particularly her grandmothers, at the thought of her marrying a non-Parsee. But she insisted, The religious differences did not matter so much in America. Feroza and David had decided to resolve the issue by becoming Unitarians.

Feroza realizes just how far she has come and wonders how much further she can go. This delightful coming-of-age novel is both remarkably funny and a remarkably acute portrayal of America as seen through the eyes of a perceptive young immigrant. However, followed by several events, especially the ones manipulated by Feroza's mother, her love doesn't culminate into a wed-lock.

Conclusion

Feroza spends three years in America and turns out to be a bold woman with a firm voice and decision-making ability which were the rare features to be found in a girl from a fundamentalism dominated country. She behaves like a global citizen now and understands that she has to stay strong to survive in this world. Furthermore, Feroza's mother, Zareen also is affected by liberty and modernity in American air. Zareen quickly and easily adjusts in American society during her visit to Feroza. She can easily witness the distinction between the cultures and various other aspects of life in two nations. Her bond with the American lifestyle broadens her mentality and lets her think in a new spirit.

"Zareen found herself seriously questioning the ban on interfaith marriages for the first time. She had often opined how unfair it was that while a Parsee man who married a "non" could keep his faith and bring up his children as Zoroastrians, a Parsee woman couldn't."(Sidhwa 287)

American culture has altered the thinking of all those who visited the country, Manek, the best example, has altogether taken it seriously to never return to Pakistan, got his education completed at MIT, received his doctorate, settled for a decent job with NASA. He is settled in his ways in the states. Though he married a Parsee girl Aban but wanted to live with her in America, raise his child in a first world country. Even Manek stands for up for Feroza when it comes to convincing Zareen.

This whole change in the mental thinking of the characters was an extension of the American culture, the culture of freedom and liberty, that does not impose its restriction on anyone's choice, and their liberty. It just promises a better life, providing every individual to choose according to their will. America gives you an option to choose, to belong/not belong, the choice is of that very individual. The society, country does not claim sole authority over the individuals' life. Feroza has realized the facts well.

Sidhwa has presented the alteration of Feroza's mind-set in a very simple yet realistic manner. The practical approach that has taken over Feroza helps her take her decisions without being hesitant. She does have a memory-filled with the love and longing for her family, but she has realized that:

"Their preoccupation with children and servants and their concern with clothes and furnishing did not interest her. Neither did the endless round of parties that followed their parents' mode of hospitality."(Sidhwa 312)

Feroza would prefer to be a part of the so-called alien country, which seemed to understand her better compared to her home. And she knew she was not alone in it, there were thousands of newcomers like her welcomed in America. She knew she could not practice her habits from home here, but that never bothered her as:

"The technology of the West kept one sufficient unto one's self without the necessity of intrusive human contact. The genie that opened garage doors, the dust-proof, climate-controlled houses, and the gadgets eliminated the need for servants, for dependence on relatives one might need to call upon in a pinch.

She was not alone in her desire for privacy and plenty. A sizeable portion of the world was experiencing this phenomenon..."(Sidhwa 313)

Her final assessment of what she was losing and what she was about to inherit did not seem too difficult. For she had clear measures what she looked for and some principles that she has now learned to approve for herself. She knew exactly what it would cost her, but she seemed ready more than ever to pay the price. She compared and contrasted almost every tiny detail of her past with her present. Evaluated what was more profitable for her life in the coming future and then decided:

"There would be no going back for her, but she will go back at will" (Sidhwa317)

Her decision was not of a teenager, a pampered, protected 16-year old Pakistani girl sent to America by her parents, who were alarmed by the fundamentalism overtaking Pakistan and their daughter. Hoping that a few months with her uncle would make her modern in her approach. But it was rather decided by a much more grown-up mind, a mature intellect, and stable emotional self that America has transformed her into.

The characters in the novel are presented in a manner that they go against the social and cultural beliefs of their motherland. They appear to be the mouthpiece for their creator. The writer seems to be voicing that the cultural and social practices that pin you down and restrict you from practicing what you believe in, should be challenged. These traditions and beliefs which sometimes are standing on baseless grounds are trying to train you to fit into some identity that one does neither believe in nor belong to. The flag bearers of such a belief system should be challenged from time to time and should not be allowed to push anyone down from approaching what they truly aspire.

The expatriates in the novel have presented both positives and negatives of the first world countries without biases. Where on one hand they have acknowledged how they feel nostalgic and experience a longing for their mother country time to time, simultaneously they also have provided the facts that America does provide relief from social illness of class and religion, it does provide a chance to explore once potential, and more importantly the freedom of practicing what one believes in.

References:

- [1]. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- [2]. Clarke, Nana Ayebia. "Cultural Identity and the African Writer UWE Africa Week 2017" Keynote Speech. The University of West England. England: Publishing Ltd @ Oxford University, Wednesday 29, March. 2017.
- [3]. Hall Stuart, *Essential Essays: Identity and Diaspora*, Volume 2, U.S.A, Duke University Press, 2019.
- [4]. Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism*. 1981-1991. London: Granta, 1991.
- [5]. Sidhwa, Bapsi. *An American Brat*. India: Penguin Books. 1994.
- [6]. _____. Interview "Pride of Pakistan". *Daily Times* 28 Aug 2016.