



RESEARCH PAPER

Diaspora, Acculturation and Identity: A Study of BapsiSidhwa's An American Brat

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ABSTRACT

Framed in relation to diaspora this work engages with the subject of how the nature of diasporic experience is determined by the socio-political scenario and whether or not the migrant feels empowerment in an altogether new locale. Diasporic experience can be understood in a variety of ways. The common thread for this paper comes from the glimpses the novel. An American Brat provides. The aim is to shed light on its impact on the protagonist. The study capitalizes on the theoretical assumptions of diasporic experience outlined by William Safran. The study shows how the protagonist undergoes the experience of identity crises and what impediments she has to face in acculturation. The study shows that the rampant socio-political and socio-economic conditions of the migrant's homeland are very much responsible for the nature of diasporic experience on the part of the central character of the novel under-study, especially how her identity is shattered and re-built. Sense of freedom, security, boldness and empowerment which she ultimately gains in a foreign land are very much conditional upon the cultural differences, social standing of her clan and political scenario of her homeland. Path towards the attainment of self-realization entails unlearning and relearning as reflected in Feroza's character. Assimilation in new culture is in fact beyond her family's expectations, for which she becomes too much modern in the end.

KEYWORDS Assimilation, Cultural Shock, Diaspora, Empowerment, Identity Crisis

Introduction

Diaspora literature involves an idea of a homeland, a place from where the displacement occurs and narratives of harsh journeys undertaken on account of economic compulsions. The diasporic experience gradually disconnects people from their homeland and is generally characterized by cultural shock, sense of otherness and feelings of alienation. BapsiSidhwa's novel *An American Brat* presents the story of a young Pakistani girl who moves to the United States. Sidhwa depicts what she confronts both psychologically and culturally. As A.M. Jamila Kanipoints, "The novel unfolds the mental, psychological, social and cultural conflicts that the shy conservative Pakistani girl Feroza confronts during the process of her migration to America" (Kani, 2013. P.3). The novel is basically about a Parsi family in Lahore, Pakistan in 1978 during the reign of a conservative dictator General Zia-ul-Haq, the then president of Pakistan. Feroza Ginwalla - the only young daughter of Cyrus and Zareen Ginwalla - is the center of story. As Parsi community is a minority living in Pakistan, the Islamization of General Zia aggravates the situation for them and they face what can be called as dual marginality. Zareen is apprehensive of her daughter becoming radical with the increasing fundamentalism in the society of Pakistan under Zia's rule and suggests sending her to the girl's uncle in the United States for three months' vacation. Her mother Zareen is pretty much concerned that her daughter Feroza has adopted un-Parsi like orthodoxy in her attitude and outlook, thereby making her misfit in her community. Neglecting her husband, Cyrus and her mother's fears, Zareen gets succeeded and Feroza sets off to America - a new world for her. From here starts the beautiful and realistic comparison of the American and Pakistani

society - broadly speaking, of Western and Eastern Society. Feroza's three years in America finally makes her "an American Brat" for her Pakistani family. She passes through undulating emotional and psychological experiences amidst a different culture and mindset. According to Muthuraman (2013), Feroza makes her way ahead journeying from the place characterized by tradition and native culture toward foreign culture. She puts in strenuous efforts to "adapt and assimilate an independence and strength of character, and decision-making which is declined to her in her own culture" (p.20). It was hoped that the trip abroad would broaden her thinking and open up further avenues for her. But the Ginwallas had no idea that she would become modern in the truest sense of the word. They had not imagined in their wildest imagination that she would challenge traditional views, static orthodoxy and grow beyond the confines of communality and the norms of a patriarchal society.

Literature Review

According to Ashcroft and et al (2013), the word 'Diaspora' is derived from the Greek word 'Diaspeir' meaning scattering or dispersion of people from their native lands to foreign ones and they define 'deracination' as the practice of uprooting an individual, a group or a nation from their territory and relocating them to another. Shepperson (1993) argues against the general practice of associating 'diaspora' solely with the Jewish people. It is, on the contrary, an inclusive term that refers to all those who have been dislocated from their land of origin. Studies related to migration and diaspora posit that migrants usually face issues of identity crisis and deracination in addition to cultural and psychological shocks as Said (2001) argues that people in diaspora are compelled to rethink and reform their sense of identity. He brings to fore the historical instances where millions of Africans experienced displacement and uprooting from their native cultures, a process that stretched across five centuries. People suffered intense cultural shocks and crisis of identity, tackling which claimed bulk of their time, energy and resources. Diasporic literature has close associations with post-colonialism and the theoretical assumptions used in both the areas of study exist in overlapping relationship. Holland (2016) argues that postcolonial literature refers to the literature produced by those who have been affected by the entire process of colonization. It is either the literature written by those who experienced colonial experience or about those whose lives have been affected by colonization. Generally the writers foreground the menace of colonization and its multifarious impacts on people. Direct or indirect attempts are made to critique the horrendous mechanism of colonialism and strains of resistance are often conspicuously present in postcolonial literature. The latter establishes a marked characteristic in terms of a canon as Manning (2003) states that the African writers are the pioneers in the development of the postcolonial literary canon. Their stance against colonialism is the strongest and the clearest of all the formerly colonized nations.

The notion of identity is established by discourse and discursive practices. For example, colonial discourse has created the binary of Occident and Orient, East and West, Black and White, European and non-European etc. Identity is therefore not a static subject. It is evolving, changing and contingent. The subject of identity holds pivotal importance in postcolonial studies and especially in postcolonial societies. According to Hall (1996), identity is the dynamic method of depiction or conversational building. He further argues that identity should not be considered as stable because it always remains in process of changing and is socially constructed and culturally established. Socio-cultural factors are generally responsible for establishing and affecting identities. And since the formation of identity is conditional upon the varying socio-cultural conditions, it remains fluid and incomplete. When it comes to the United States, manifold hardships related to economic and cultural spheres are levelled on migrants especially from postcolonial spaces. Chiefly in line with this idea, Sidhwa (1993) explores cultural cum ethnic clashes. In her novel *An American Brat*, the protagonist is depicted as the one who imitates the culture and mores of the Americans. Feroza seems highly fascinated by alien culture and shows a great deal of

absorption. The act of imitation on the part of people from colonized spaces is an attempt to become genuine. Imitation places people in a no-man's land because as a matter of fact, the imitators remain in ambivalent position. That is why Bhaba (1994) terms it as kind of colonial conversation. He describes imitation an indication of the dual expression; a complicated policy of transformation, supervision, and obedience that is suitable for the 'the Other' as it pictures strength. There often emerges a situation where the migrants, howsoever engrossed they are in a foreign culture, feel the need for reconnection with their native roots. In case of Feroza, it comes about when she realizes that she is being 'othered' and considered as inferior. She tries to restore her actual origins.

According to Forster (1981), the smooth relationship and cohesion on equal footing between the dominant and subjugated nations is almost impossible, for it is hard to uproot the phenomenon of ethnic prejudice and cultural bias. Sidhwa (1993) delineates this ethnic prejudice which underlines the dominance of one group that is America (west) and subordination of other that is Pakistan (East) because of cultural principles and customs. The Eastern people in general carry a sense of subjugation and this is evident in the character of Feroza and this in turn has negative bearing on the identity formation. Not to speak of friendship and equality, the migrants are compelled to live with the feeling of disparity and sense of distorted identities. In post-colonial writing, the notion of identity holds key position. The colonial discourse is very much responsible, among other things, in labelling identities with certain fixed and stable tropes whereby the East is deemed as a space of barbarism, violence, ignorance and unreasonableness. By contrast, the West stands for all the positive characteristics ranging from decency and civility to advancement and honesty. According to Hall (1996), the postcolonial writings reflect that people from third world or colonized nations have hard times adjusting in the foreign cultures especially those of materially advanced countries. Stay in the alien culture ultimately results in enervating ties with nativity at one hand and partial absorption in the target culture on the other. Migrants, therefore, often feel what is psychologically termed as inferiority complex. The attempt to be westernized and failure to attain it thoroughly cause identity crisis.

Bulk of diasporic literature voice the issues of identity crises, acculturation and cultural shock. Similar issues are articulated by Sidhwa in *An American Brat*. Feroza seems torn between two identities - conservatism of native country and liberal and openness of foreign culture. The novel may rightly be considered as the reflection of the dilemma of identity as evidenced in the character of the protagonist. The novelist depicts Feroza's ambivalence in her initial reluctance to visit America and then being intrigued by foreign culture once she settles there. She is supposed to live there under the protection of her uncle. In the beginning it is hard for her to acclimatize herself owing chiefly to the fact that she faces cultural shock. However, with the passage of time, she starts imitating the foreign culture and develops interest in liberty. At certain juncture, for some obvious reasons, Feroza feels the need for restoring her lost or obscured connections with native land and culture. Crushed between the two extremes, she undergoes identity crises. Betrayal at the hands of her boyfriend adds insult to the injury since she becomes quite dejected and depressed. She grapples with the issues related to the migrants from colonized spaces. The current study focuses only on the issues related to immigration specifically identity crisis and the problems of assimilation in a foreign culture.

Material and Methods

This study is qualitative in nature and textual analysis has been employed as a research method. Important and relevant passages and quotes are culled from the novel in order to support the research argument. These paragraphs serve as textual evidence to substantiate the claims made by the researchers. Using textual analysis for this qualitative study, the researchers attempt to examine and interpret the worldviews which affirm protagonist's experience of identity crisis and his difficulty in assimilation. The present

study is likely to bridge important research gaps and will contribute to the existing corpus of knowledge especially the existing body of criticism on the novel under study.

Theoretical Framework

African diaspora is discussed by Ledent (2015) highlights the problems faced by African diasporic community in developing relationship with the American whites. The crux of her article bears no close affinity with the research at hand, so it is not relevant for this study. William Safran (1991) in his article *Diasporas in Modern Societies and Myths of Return* illustrates defining features of diaspora and presents some common denominators shared by people living in diaspora. Safran (1991) argues that diaspora refers to those who are away from their homelands, for any reason, and they either wish to remain connected with their country of birth or they want to go back. They carry a sense of detachment and long for being connected with the native culture. So the urge for connectivity with and feeling of detachment from the native country and experiential difficulty in assimilation with the foreign culture underlie, among other facets, the Safran's diasporic model.

The afore-mentioned theorists in Diasporic studies have given detailed description of diaspora and its multiple facets in varied social contexts. The theoretical canons presented by these theorists could be exploited for different research studies related to post-colonialism and diasporic experiences. However, keeping in view the objectives and research questions formulated for the current study, William Safran's theoretical model bears close relevance with the task at hand. It may well be exploited for this research as this paper aims at examining the problems faced by the protagonist with regard to her identity and assimilation in a foreign culture. In case of those individuals who face psychological and cultural hardships in acculturation, Safran's assumptions bear a good deal of significance. Much at par with the research objectives formulated for the current study, the chief focus is laid on the following characteristic features of diasporic experiences as illustrated by Safran. They are as follows:

- a. Diasporic individuals feel nostalgic about their home country and consistently long for it.
- b. They may well be viewed as uprooted individuals in an alien land undergoing blatant episodes of identity crisis.
- c. They face seriously damaging problems in being assimilated to a target culture.

In addition to being haunted by the feelings of the past and homeland culture, they have hard time adjusting in a new culture. They literally find themselves in a no-man's land with psychological condition marked with ambivalence.

Results and Discussion

Cultural-differences and Identity Crisis

Cultural difference focuses on the issue of the upheavals of culture-divide presented mainly in the novel *An American Brat*. Feroza's journey to the United States of America is supposedly a learning process but instead it makes the protagonist too modern for her patriarchal and seemingly liberal family. The protagonist of the novel Feroza basically experiences three cultures —her own community's Parsi culture, her country Pakistan's Islamic culture and the western culture of the United States of America. The novel is about the process of Feroza's understanding of her own and other cultures until her transformation into a mature woman. The novel deals with the changes that Feroza

undergoes in the West and how her perspective on life changes. "In its seemingly innocuous portrayal of the (mis)adventures of its young protagonist Feroza, in the USA, it actually describes the painful process of losing and replacing homes....."(Sehgal,2012, p.2). But besides the experience of dislocation and alienation associated with diaspora, she starts coming to terms with the new culture in a short time and rather quickly. Initially, her psychological make-up intensifies the experience of cultural shock for her but substantial changes can be noticed in her thinking and an altogether different life-style. As Sheikh in the book review mentions "Feroza's character is supposed to have undergone sea changes, especially when she stays on in America for some years, studying" (Sheikh,2008, P.1). Prior to her immigration, she follows orthodox Islamic code and is not happy with her mother's dress of sleeveless blouse and sari. The developing conservative mindset in a society where fundamentalism is rife, the protagonist's mother senses the apprehension. Zareen informs her husband, "She objected to my sleeveless saree-blouse! Really, this narrow-minded attitude touted by General Zia is infecting her, too" (Sidhwa,1994, p.10). But surprisingly for the mother, she becomes somewhat ultra-modern for her family which betokens her speedy learning in the US."Sidhwa shows that the journey to the U.S.A is supposedly a learning process, but instead it makes her "too modern" for her Patriarchal and seemingly liberal family" (Sheela, P.18). She feels happier than before and finds herself quite free and dependable. Though she is disappointed by the insults and dehumanizing behavior of the officers at the airport, she forgets everything when she indulges in a tour to New York.

Pandya in the paper titled *Nativism, Rootlessness, Ethnic Anxiety and Culture Clash in An American Brat* puts in, "She gets exposed to American culture and she starts enjoying the freedom she gets there. Alongside, she also goes disrespectful and uncourteous. Manek tames her behavior and teaches her mannerism(Pandya, 2013,P.25). In fact, in the US she begins to have full consciousness of what her homeland culture is and where she stands as a conscious individual in that society. The journey towards understanding new culture is also about understanding thoroughly your native culture. The prevalent socio-political and economic scenario in Pakistan during General Zia's reign has definitely made an impact on Feroza's mind. Being the girl from a developing country, a member of minority group and adherent to the codes where girls are not allowed to play hockey and move outside without veil, the diasporic experience proves positive for the grooming of her 'self', notwithstanding the initial predicaments in the US. Garg (2008) also corroborates succinctly that the second half of the novel casts a close look at the American social life and presents how an individual from third world country might respond to it psychologically and culturally. The protagonist's response is determined by the socio-cultural and socio-economic conditions of her native country as Kanirightly points out: "Experiences are shaped by economic positions, personal skills and political relationships between country of origin and of adoption" (p.7). She argues that Feroza's past experiences enable her to think about her life seriously and to decide about her future with confidence. "The migrant Feroza has adjusted herself well to a different culture and "there would be no going back for her"(p.7). Had she been from a developed country where women were not thought of as commodity and human freedom not curbed, her response to new culture would have been quite different. Feroza tacitly assumes that this is the right place for her and feels herself more empowered here.

Feroza's movement to America shapes her into a bold and confident woman. Later on, she begins to live her life independently. "Feroza's, identity hence, undergoes transformation in the interplay of history, culture and power" (Phutela, 2013, p.7). So in this book of self-realization, the self-awareness that Feroza Ginwalla acquires, ironically isolates her from her Parsi heritage. It is not unnatural for a Pakistani immigrant to be taken aback by the scintillating western culture and so is the case with Feroza Ginwalla. From Western dresses to the collective psyche of the people, there is a lot to surprise and shock her. The Zoroastrian mode of life of Feroza clashes with the modern American way of thinking and life styles. The resultant friction compels her to make a moral choice in her

life. And Feroza's mental turmoil typifies the predicament of the modern multicultural society. She also represents those who are torn between tradition and modernity and thus strive hard to strike a balance between these tropes such as tradition and modernity, past and present, dependence and freedom. While flying and falling alternately, they are trying to soar to the state of being self-contained from where there is no falling. Even her first encounter at the airport is quite disappointing. She feels so much humiliated by the rough behavior of customs inspector that she blurts out, "To hell with you and your damn country. I will go back" (p.64). When she encounters a moving staircase, an American couple helps her use the down escalator. She is, in fact, escorted by them. Their courteous behavior and help helps her forget and forgive the customs officer and the experience. The process of self-realization begins not before long for her. She realizes she is in a strange country amidst strangers. She assumes that her uncle who looks much Americanized in his manners must have undergone such humiliations many a times. The novelist writes, "He must have endured countless humiliations. And his experiences – the positive and the humiliating – had affected him, changed him not on the surface but fundamentally" (p.102). Given that Feroza is from a conservative background where fundamentalism is rife, almost each and every thing, habit and custom looks strange and often immoral to her. The girl smiling at Manek, her uncle, surprises her as it is not usually the case in Pakistan. Manek responds to her surprise, "Civilized people don't kick them in the balls just because they happen to stare at them" (p.106). Feroza recalls her aunt, mom and grandmother's voices on such occasions. "Aren't you ashamed, looking at women? How would you like if our men stared at your sisters?" (p.106). There is a vivid depiction of her incredibility at the lights, skyscrapers and shopping at New York. Kani thus puts in, "Her innocence as well as ignorance comes to light when she gets lost on the fire stair at the YMCA, in a museum at Boston and her confusion when confronted by a sex maniac at the YMCA bathroom" (Kani,2013 P.7). Her uncle tries to pacify the intensity of culture shock which the new culture has cast upon her. He wants her to imbibe the progressive and stimulating culture of the U.S.A. He deliberately puts her into challenging new situations in order to make her courageous and dependable.

Socio-Political Milieu

All through the novel Sidhwa depicts the incidents related with diasporic experience which change and shape the psyche and attitude of the protagonist girl. *An American Brat* is a novel about a sixteen year old Punjabi Parsi girl – Feroza who happens to visit the US initially on a three-month holiday and then to study. The visit is, actually, planned for a different reason. Feroza's parents – Zareen and Cyrus Ginwalla are surprised rather shocked to see her conservative attitude, a result of Pakistani fundamentalist attitude. They are concerned at Feroza's conservative attitudes which sided with Pakistan's rising tide of fundamentalism, during the reign of the late President Zia-ul-Haq. Her mother Zareen is perturbed that her daughter Feroza has adopted un-Parsi like orthodoxy in her attitude and outlook, thereby making her a misfit in her community. "Really, this narrow-minded attitude touted by General Zia is infecting her" (p.10). It was hoped that the trip abroad would broaden Feroza's thinking and open up further avenues for her. The book keeps up to the socio-political obligations in the sense that the reigning political and social scenario, the religious beliefs and its impact on the protagonists and the society at large are all taken into account in a very effective way. This is a time when the urban elite in Pakistan is trying to adjust to the conservative policies of General Zia; whereas, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto is behind the bars for his policies regarding socialism and women's rights. Although Feroza comes under the influence of Zia's compulsive and puritanical policies, she can't help showing her love for socialism. Thus, she carries the poster of Mr. Bhutto to hang on the wall of her American residence. Sidhwa writes, "In Pakistan, politics concerned everyone – from the street sweeper to the business tycoon – because it personally affected everyone" (p.171). The introduction of Haddood Ordinances by General Zia in 1979 had reduced women to mere commodities. The novelist refers to various incidents where women have to face the music for exercising their choice to

marry. "The couple who had eloped to get married, had been accused of committing adultery and they were sentenced to death by stoning" (p.236). As far Zina ordinance, it required for victimized woman to produce four male eye-witnesses or eight female eyewitnesses to establish rape; otherwise, the assailant would usually get away with the crime. The novelist rightly states that owing to the improbability of producing four male witnesses, the rapist would often escape the punishment. The process of 'Islamization' carried out during Zia's time made a drastic impact on the lives of people. Various forms of recreation were banned; women were not allowed to mix up freely with men. They were compelled to wear veils.

Assimilation/Acculturation

Passing through transitory ordeals works for her as well as for Manek. He succeeds in teaching her lessons and she learns the new ways of American culture. When she inquires about the logic of leaving her in the lurch, he says, "Yes, you did all the right things. You didn't panic, you didn't approach strangers for help, and you got the cops to help you." (p.133). In Pakistan, being a woman and a member of a minority group, she didn't have freedom and freewill. She could neither realize her potentials nor could she utilize any of them for her personal development. In fact, she felt, like other women, disempowered. In the U.S.A, she undergoes a complete transformation. Having experienced entirely two different cultures, she, at first very shy at her homeland, is soon attracted by the modernized Western culture. She learns to drive, drink and dance, use a more direct and less polite form. Sidhwa goes to the extent of asserting that the protagonist was disconcerted to discover that she was a misfit in a country in which she had once fitted so well" (p.239). In the conservative society in Pakistan, she has hesitantly talked to young men, but in the modernized America, she flirts with Shashi an Indian student at the University of Denver. Her parents had not thought that she would become modern in the truest sense of the word. They had not imagined in their wildest imagination that she would challenge traditional views, static orthodoxy and grow beyond the confines of communality and the norms of a patriarchal society. On the matter of marriage, she clearly tells her mother, who can't believe her to be the four years back Feroza, "I'm not settling anywhere without a career. I don't want to be at the mercy of my husband. If I have a career, I can earn a living, and he will respect me more" (p.240). On another occasion, her mother expresses her concern at David's background and Feroza's insistence on marrying a non-Parsi. "Don't be absurd, mum. If you go about talking of people's pedigrees, the Americans will laugh at you" (p.277). In fact, she assimilates to the new culture and it helps her realize her 'self', individuality and existential freedom.

Conclusion

The work selected for this research is Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *An American Brat*. The research shows that the rampant socio-political and socio-economic conditions of the migrant's homeland are very much responsible for the personal nature of diasporic experience, especially how the identity is shattered and re-built. And the diasporic experience doesn't necessarily lead to dislocation and disempowerment. Feroza the protagonist of the story ultimately feels herself more independent, bold, empowered and confident. She is now capable of exercising her will or choice. Cultural and religious restrictions that suppress her individuality no longer confine her vision of life in a new social set-up. Feelings of alienation subside in a relatively short time and she begins to feel herself fit in the new culture. Had her home country been progressive and people more enlightened, the case of her acculturation wouldn't have been that much rapid and the experience in new culture would have been varied and different. In fact, the nature of diasporic experience is largely dependent upon the socio-economic, socio-religious and socio-political conditions of the migrant's homeland. It may turn out to be more positive with respect to self-realization and progressiveness just as seen in case of Feroza. She does undergo the disintegration of personality. Initially in the wake of cultural shock, she

experiences identity crisis but later on, she succeeds in reintegrating her identity by assimilating into the new culture. The basic research contention that diasporic experience leads to identity crisis proves only partially true because ultimately, the protagonist witnesses positive change in her personality.

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