

The Theme of Marriage and Migration in Sidhwa's *An American Brat*

Talluri Mathew Bhaskar

Lecturer in English Andhra Pradesh Residential Junior College Vijayapuri South,
Guntur District, Andhra Pradesh-522439, India

Abstract

Little is known about the miniscule community of the Parsees inspite of their signal contribution to various facets of national life in the Indian Sub-Continent. Creative writing by Parsees has evoked considerable interest lately. Some promising Parsee novelists like Bapsi Sidhwa, Rohinton Mistry and Boman Desai use English as an instrument of self-assertion. It was Sidhwa who gave a distinct identity to Pakistan's novel in English. Her fourth novel **An American Brat** chronicles the adventures of a young Pakistani girl in America. Shy, traditional and conservative Feroza, the protagonist of the novel, who in her school days has objected to her mother's sleeveless sari-blouse, quickly gains independence once she is in America. Her journey towards independence involves several choices, almost all of them forcing her to move away from the rigid, constrictive mores of her childhood society. The perennial Parsee-problem of inter-faith marriage arises when Feroza wants to marry David Press, an American Jew. Astute characterization, a hallmark of Sidhwa's writing style, keeps the tone lively and entertaining.

KEYWORDS: American Brat, Political Overtones, Constrictive mores, Feroza, Parsee-problem.

Bapsi Sidhwa is not very methodical in her writing but instead prefers to write in spurts. She stressed that she was not a methodical or disciplined writer like Charles Dickens, R.L.Stevenson or Nayantara Sahgal. In an interview to Asif Rahim Khan, Sidhwa explains about her approach to writing:

*When I am writing a novel, and if I happen to write ten days a month, that's about the maximum. But when I do write, I write for almost 12 to 14 to 18 hours a day. You get onto a roll, and sometimes you just don't want to stop, and then I can leave the novel for three months or six months. It happened while I was writing **Ice-Candy-Man**...I cannot just write continuously. After all, the brain does not get tired and emptied. And you don't want to force yourself to write—so I write when I am able to write.¹*

The cultural difference is the pivot of *An American Brat* but it is an important issue in her other three novels as well. The issue of the cultural difference moves from periphery to centre in Sidhwa's fourth novel, *An American Brat*. Sidhwa replies to a question by Naila Hussain about the theme of *An American Brat*:

*Naturally, the book (**An American Brat**) deals with the subject of the culture-shock-young people from the Sub-Continent have to contend with when they choose to study abroad. It also delineates the clashes, the divergent cultures generate between the families 'back home' and their transformed and transgressing progeny bravely groping their way in the new world.²*

While her earlier novels portray different facts of human life in her home territory, Sidhwa's fourth novel, *An American Brat* shifts the local to her familiar surroundings in the United States. Sidhwa's concentration is, however, still focused on problems related with individual and collective identities of her people. The novel set partly in Lahore and partly in the U.S.A, is the story of a young Parsee girl's Americanisation and reflects the new American theme in Sidhwa. The novel tells the story of Feroza Ginwalla, descendent of Faredoon Jungle Wala whose life is chronicled in *The Crow Eaters*. The Protagonist, Feroza, is a sixteen-year-old Pakistan's Parsee girl. She is a metric student at the convent of the Sacred Heart, a girls' school in Lahore. She is the daughter of Cyrus and Zareen Ginwalla. She is traditional, shy and conservative. Though expatriate experience constitutes the core of the narrative in *An American Brat*, Sidhwa brings in a variety of relevant issues such as mixed marriages and oppression of women. Sidhwa's canvas is much broader than that of Bharati Mukherjee. Parsees who marry outside of the community forego all the privileges enjoyed by the other Parsees. The time of the novel is the late seventies. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto is in jail and Islamic fundamentalism is growing in Pakistan. Feroza, the heroine of the story, a sixteen-year-old girl has been carefully brought up in the small but prosperous Parsee community in Lahore. The novel is a socio-political critique of a bleak society which suffers under political instability, military suppression and increased Islamic fundamentalism. Some non-Islamic communities like the Parsees were affected by the increasing fundamentalism. Zareen complains about her daughter's attitudes being affected by the fundamentalism. Zareen is perturbed because Feroza is becoming more and more backward every day. One day, Feroza objects to her mother's sleeveless sari-blouse and tells her not to visit her school dressed like that Zareen really gets worried about her. The un-Parsee like orthodoxy in Feroza's attitude and out like alarms her mother who tells her husband that Feroza objects to her wearing a modern dress:

She continued: "I went to bring Feroza from school today. I was chatting with Mother Superior on the veranda—she was out enjoying the sun—and I had removed my cardigan. Feroza pretended she didn't know me.

"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.'

*"When I was in her age, I wore frocks and cycled to Kinnaird College. And that was in '59 and '60—fifteen years after Partition! Can she wear frocks? No. Women mustn't show their legs, women shouldn't dress like this, and women shouldn't act like that. Girls mustn't play hockey or sing or dance! If everything corrupts their pious little minds so easily, then the **mullahs** should wear **burqas** and stay within the four walls of their houses!"* (p.10)

Women in Pakistan are most affected by the dictates of narrow religious sanctions which propagate gender segregation. Zareen admits that things have changed in Pakistan. The claustrophobic atmosphere of General Zia's Islamisation is quite alarming. Zareen says:

*“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 it in 1978! Our Parsee children in Lahore won’t know how to mix with Parsee kids in Karachi or Bombay.”*
(p.11)

There is no harm in Feroza’s staying narrow-minded if it means dressing decently. But Feroza is under the influence of fundamentalism. Cyrus and his wife Zareen decided to send their daughter Feroza to America where Manek, Zareen’s brother, a graduate student at M.I.T. Manek would take care of her. Only a week earlier Cyrus saw Feroza talking to an unknown young man in the sitting-room and he fears his susceptible daughter might fall in love and marry a non-Parsee. For that purpose Cyrus agrees to his wife’s suggestion. Zareen wants her daughter to grow and expand. Her brother Manek accepts the proposal of his sister. And now, Feroza has come to America to break and come out of the narrow shell of life. Manek receives her at Kennedy Airport. She feels glad to be sharing her adventures with her uncle. The moment Feroza steps into the lounge at Kennedy Airport, she is triumphant and glowing. She is dazzled by the orderly traffic of rushing people, the bright lights and warmed air, the extraordinary cleanliness and sheen on the floors and furnishings. Before her arrival here, she is told by her grandmother, mother and aunts that she should talk to any strangers, nor should she accept anything to eat or drink from them as it might be dangerous. She politely refuses a young Pakistani’s offer of coke or tea at Heathrow in London. Manek makes her undergo adventures, teaches her manners and helps her cope with all sorts of unexpected situations. At Kennedy Airport, the Immigration officer, and a Customs inspector grill her and rummage through her bags and suitcases. Manek tries to convince the Immigration officers that he has not done anything illegally. He says:

“I work in the university cafeteria and at other odd jobs there, officer. She’s just arrived, she doesn’t know. I receive enough money from home for my tuition and living expenses. I can show you my bank drafts and statements to prove it. I can get a letter from my university. I work only for them. I’m permitted that.”
(p.63)

The dazzling wares in the shops at New York have Feroza bewildered. Bapsi’s novel is similar to Bharati Mukherji’s *Jasmine*. Feroza’s guide is her uncle Manek. He is an experienced expatriate studying at M.I.T, Boston. Manek’s assimilation to the American ways of life reflects a certain continuity of them in Bapsi Sidhwa’s novels. Feroza’s conservatism is the outcome of the rising wave of Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan. But Zareen, the mother of Feroza, is a progressive Parsee whose liberalism is in sharp contrast to her husband’s conservatism. Feroza is sent to America as her family believes that America with its liberal traditions was akin to the liberated Parsee traditions. The novel deals with the change that Feroza undergoes in the west and how her perspective of Pakistan changes. Feroza’s passage to America, her education, her transformation into a mature young woman, all set to realize her potentials in a country where freedom is a cherished ideal, form the kernel of the novel. Feroza’s journey to America serves the novel in two ways: it is Feroza’s journey towards self discovery and also serves to give the protagonist precious objectivity which enables a

fair evaluation of both the societies that she is affiliated to. Feroza tries to cope with the different life-style of the Americans and the modern technology used by them. Manek gives her the first lesson that she must learn to control her temper while she is in America. She has a very unpleasant experience at the bathroom where she encounters two sex-maniacs. Manek takes her to the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, the twin World Trade Towers, Wall Street, Lexington Avenue, and all the major museums. There are male prostitutes, American style Hizras, Pimps, Mini-skirted prostitutes, dung-dealers and runover in the U.S.A.

In New York Feroza has some unpleasant experiences. Manek has moved into an attic of a large, two-storied three bed-room house in a seedy part of Somerville near Union Square. He shares the house with five other Pakistani and Indian students. Manek drives Feroza around Boston in his fifth-hand ford car and takes her to different places. He undertakes the task of preparing Feroza for life in an alien land. He wants her to pursue her studies in a junior college in Twin Falls, Idaho. Feroza succumbs to America's charms and decides to stay on as a student. Here she discovers the joys and tribulations of American campus-life. Under the influence of her American roommate Jo, Feroza completely adapts an American lifestyle. She acts and talks and dresses like an American girl. The shy and conservative Feroza turns into a confident and self-assertive girl. She learns to drive, dance and use the American slang. After coming to America, the shy Feroza who at Lahore hesitantly talked to young man, now flirts with Shashi, an Indian student at the university of Denver, where she studies hotel management. Later she falls in love with an American Jew David Press. Now she becomes confident self-assertive. Her love affair with David comes to an end because of her mother Zareen's interference. The geographical journey for Feroza from the third world of conservative Pakistan to the first world of free and liberal America has been described very realistically by the novelist. The novelist exposes the protagonist to the cruel and harsh realities of life when she lands in America. The novelist makes it clear that Feroza's journey is a journey of her own experience of learning the new ways of life and of becoming aware of one's own self. One cannot depend upon others; one has to be on one's own. Bapsi Sidhwa provides for a gradual transformation in Feroza. America is a land of dreams. It also has its darker side. The protagonist is made aware of this through her fall into the filthy fire-stairs. The novelist exposes the protagonist to both the aspects of America. Feroza's parents learn of her love for David Press, an American Jew. Jews seem to have similar old traditions as the Indians or Pakistanis or Parsees have. Feroza's parents decide to call her back and persuade her to marry a Parsee boy. Feroza tells her uncle and aunt about David. Then for a moment there is a absolute quiet. Manek says thoughtfully:

"I think you have to be sure first. Give it time... There's no big hurry. He's probably the first man in your life..." Manek stole a glance at Feroza. Her face was set in haughty mold he knew so well. *"It all seems wonderful now, but marriage is something else: our cultures are very different. Of course I'm not saying it can't work, but you have to give it time. We'll keep in touch on the phone, see how it goes?"* Manek ended on a tentative note, at last looking directly at Feroza. It was a caring look, and Feroza felt a surge of relief and gratitude.

"I wish you'd brought up the subject earlier," Manek said. *"I've had a long day, and I'm not thinking clearly. But I and Aban are going to be here. You can count on us."*

(p.263)

Feroza decides to see the permission to marry David. She sends a letter along with a photograph to her parents. The letter causes a flutter in the family. Zareen rushed to America. At the Denver airport, she is received by Feroza and David. Zareen says that there are three marriageable Parsee boys in Lahore and Karachi. Their mothers have expressed an ardent desire to make Feroza their daughter-in-law. Zareen asks about David's ancestry and his family connections. She says:

"Don't be absurd, Mum," Feroza said. "If you go about talking of people's pedigrees, the Americans will laugh at you."

Cut to the quick, Zareen plucked a tissue from the box on the kitchen table. "It's no laughing matter. You'll be thrown out of the community! Do you know what happens to girls who marry out?" (p.277)

Zareen explains to her the risks of marrying outside her faith. She would be thrown out of the community. Zareen regrets her having sent Feroza to America. In a fit of anger Zareen says:

"I should have listened. I should never have let you go so far away. Look what it's done to you—you've become an American brat!" (p.279)

Zareen too is impressed by the new liberal style of living of David but her only anxiety is that Feroza would be an outcast and unacceptable to the priests and patriarchs of the community. Unable to dissuade Feroza from her decision to marry David, Zareen discourages and frightens him into breaking away from Feroza by telling him about her customs and traditions:

The very thing that had attracted him to Feroza, her exoticism, now frightened David. Zareen had made him feel that he and Feroza had been too cavalier and callow in dismissing the dissimilarities in their backgrounds. He felt inadequate, wondering if he could cope with some of the rituals and behaviour that, despite his tolerant and accepting liberality, seemed bizarre. Stuff his mouth with sweets; break a coconut on his head! And, were he by some gross mischance accepted to Zoroastrian faith, which fortunately was not permissible, he'd have the singular honor of having his remains devoured by vultures and crows in ghastly Tower of Silence. (p.309)

Zareen has succeeded in causing an estrangement between him and Feroza. David's feelings for Feroza undergo a change. Her exoticism which once attracted him to her now frightens him. He thinks of going out of her life. Luckily he gets a job with a firm in California and leaves Denver at the end of the summer term. The affair with David disintegrates due to Feroza's mother Zareen's interference. The novel ends with Feroza becoming in her mother's words an 'American brat'. Feroza does not meekly return to Lahore for an arranged marriage with one of the three nice boys chosen for her. She desires privacy. She also desires freedom from social inhibitions which the first world provides. She will marry a man whom she comes to like and love without bothering herself whether he is Parsee or of different faith. She is Parsee and she continues to be a Parsee. If the priests in Lahore and Karachi do not let her enter the

fire temple, she will go one in Bombay where there a many Parsees that no one will know whether she is married to Parsee or to a non-Parsee. The novel ends ambivalently. Novy Kapadia says:

*The novel ends ambivalently. Feroza, despite has estranged love affair and general feelings of depression, prefers the struggle for freedom and self-fulfilment at the U.S.A. Instead of settled life fairly and every contentment at Lahore.*³

As a Parsee writer Bapsi Sidwa does not take a rebellious stance against the dominating ideology of her community. Sidhwa does not endorse the traditional Parsee code on inter-community or inter-faith marriage. Through the characters of Zareen and Feroza she hits at the need for change. At the end of the novel, the novelist expresses her convictions:

Feroza lay down, resting her head on stacked pillows, her arms folded on her stomach, calmer than she had been for a long time. There would never be another David, but there would be other men, and who knew, perhaps someday she might like someone enough to marry him.

*It wouldn't matter if he was a Parsee or of another faith. She would be surer of herself, and she wouldn't let anyone interfere. It really wouldn't matter; weren't they all children of the same Adam and Eve? 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 would know if she married to a Parsee or a non.
(p.317)*

The protagonist of the novel journeys through three cultures. They are Parsee culture, Islamic culture and the Western culture of the United States of America. The novelist portrays Parsee community's traditional dictum of double standards.

Works Cited

1. Interview of Bapsi Sidhwa by Rahim Khan in *Weekend Post* of Friday, October 23,1991, p.3
2. Hussain, Naila. 'On the Writers' World, interview with Bapsi Sidhwa, *The Nation*, 26 May, 1993:19.
3. The Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa, ed, R.K.Dhawan and Novy Kapadia (New delhi: Prestige, 1996) p.191.