



Women in Sidhwa's *An American Brat*: A Gynocentric Perspective

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Abstract

Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *An American Brat* collects narratives of insulted and injured people, especially the women, who are victims of the distorted cultural shifts. Sidhwa, in this novel, exposes the pain and suffering of women through the experiences and memories of Feroza. She was humiliated from numbers of people and one among them is an American officer's rudeness who forced to marry with her uncle Manek. He threatened to take a legal action if they live together without marriage. She faces the numbers of challenges in America and she has to reach up to the decision of being back to Lahore in Pakistan where she could feel safe. The objective of this paper is to show the difficulties to adjust in the new cultural values that one cannot adopt easily. Finding of this paper is that it is better to be flexible ourselves if we shift to the new geographical location and the new cultural practices zone. Cultural rigidity is a main cause of human suffering. The novel is studied from gynocentric perspective and this paper is prepared in qualitative method of women centered study. Theoretical support is taken from Gaur, Menon, Bhasin, Das and Butalia to explore how cultural rigidity can create problem in this global world.

Keywords: Cultural rigidity, dilemma, humiliation, insulted and injured, legal action

Introduction

An American Brat, a novel written by Bapsi Sidhwa is about dreams, desires and dilemma of American culture. Feroza Ginwalla, a young Pakistani girl, aged 16, is sent to Pakistan for her

studies but she is victim of the cultural shifts. She does not have much interest in their educational system and cultural performances. She likes to be back to Lahore from the land of White people. Feroza opposes the traditional belief

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of her mother Zareen Ginwalla as she says, "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" (*An American Brat*, p. 10). Feroza rejects the superstitious belief of her mother. She tries to persuade her mother to reject the wrong socio-cultural practices and break the boundary of staying within the four walls of their houses which is the problem for women's progress.

Feroza speaks against the religious biasness and the bad practices in the cultural performances. She opines against the traditional practices of the racial, cultural and gender dominance but her mother is unhappy about her activities and attitudes. Zareen Ginwalla questions about their daughter Feroza's solitariness and complains with her husband Cyrus. She critiques:

She's becoming more and more backward every day. Set in tight-lipped censure, Zareen's face betrayed the hours spent in solitary brooding and the ark anxieties her brooding had spawned. Cyrus who thought his daughter was anything too forward, maintained his guard. He examined his fingernails cursorily, made a discreet sound in the back of his throat, and raised his eyebrows a fraction. She won't even answer the phone anymore! What if it's someone I don't know? Zareen mimicked her daughter in English. I told her don't be silly. (pp. 9-10)

Feroza's behavior is rude and she fails to keep a harmonious relationship even with her parents. She doesn't respond to her parents well. Zareen used to go to school to bring her daughter Feroza home safely but her dialogue hurts Zareen as she says,

"Mummy, please don't come to school dressed like that. She objected to my sleeveless sari-blouse!" (p. 10). Feroza fails to remember their family practices and dishonors her mother's love. She is rude to her mother and her behavior hurts her. Zareen shares her words with her husband Cyrus and they are forced to discuss seriously about her behavioral changes and attitude problems.

Cyrus and Zareen's judgements about Feroza on the one hand make a query on Feroza's nature and on the other hand it exposes to the cultural and religious differences. Mother-daughter relationships and ideological differences present the pictures of the age gaps. Feroza pretends herself as a politician and Benazir Bhutto's postures are put to her room. She claims that she is also a democrat, open-minded socialist and a freedom fighter. Political ideology of Benazir Bhutto helped for democratic movements and her victory in the government helped for freedom of women. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's rule over Pakistan was proved undemocratic and so majority of the people supported the democratic leader Bhutto. She assumes, her democratic nature in governing the nation well and she helps women for their individual freedom. Feroza's experiences in addition to the cultural and political disharmony question on financial position, too. Feroza's parents sent her to America in guardianship of her uncle Manek for her education. Uncle Manek came to the airport to receive her, took her with him and kept safely for few months. Later on, she was suffered of some cultural shifts and wanted to live alone. She started to decide the things in her own choice and take the decision herself. Feroza claims that her living in America with her uncle Manek

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is painful. She experiences there bad and wants to be back to her nation where she could enjoy her own individual freedom.

This paper is prepared in qualitative method from women-centered perspective. Resources used in this study are available criticisms, the novel and theories. Background of the study makes coverage on partition history of India and Pakistan whereas numbers of women were abducted, seduced and raped. Innocent people were made homeless because of the Hindu-Sikh and Muslim wars. Later on, the study discusses about problem of the cultural rigidity even in America. Stories and experiences of the insulted and injured women are carried out from the primary sources.

This study focuses on the stories of abducted, seduced and raped women with process of rehabilitation and recovery. The rehabilitation and recovery projects make feminist interventions, which rely heavily on the survivors' accounts that is seen in the light of the valorization of distorted women's subjectivity in the revisionist historiography of 1947. Feminist critics such as Rashmi Gaur, Veena Das, Ritu Menon and Urvashi Butalia blend the cultural subjectivity and immigrant's problems with their feminist consciousness. Women's intervention has a dual goal: one is to restore women history to the previous position and the next is to show the nation's policy with its identical history to women. Therefore, this paper is prepared in qualitative method and it discusses about the socio-cultural problems of women's issues.

Socio-Political and Cultural Dilemma

An American Brat, in addition to the socio-political dilemma raises the issues of cultural shifts and religious conflicts.

Feroza's cultural difficulties are discussed as common problems of the people who migrate from one geographical location to next part of the globe. The narratives unbury the traumatic history of the cultural war period that is reflected in the novel. It reflects to the images of a distorted girl and picturizes to the holocaust image with an abduction, seduction and rape of an innocent girl. Numbers of discourses are made upon cross-cultural experiences of the women victimization. One among them is Khutlibai and Zareen's conversational narrative that discloses some events, "... pregnant with unspeakable knowledge of the sexual license allowed American girls and the perils of drink and drugs. Compounding the danger were vivid images of rapists looming in dark alleys to entice, molest, and murder young girls" (p. 30).

In a chilly cold morning, Khutlibai talks with Zareen about the weather and then she shifts her narratives about insecurities. She asks also about her husband Cyrus, his business and daughter Faroza. She makes a query about their condition, too. They have a hot discussion in the cold weather whereas the people in America are victim of the drinks and drugs and they commit the crimes. The discussion exposes that the girls are always in danger of abduction, seduction and rape either they are in the schools or in the community.

Girls are always in danger and sometimes their guardians also turn to be monstrous. They forget their relationships and responsibilities. Some of the communities and certain agencies force to take a wrong decision. Among the wrong decision makers, Manek's officer is skeptical and he forces Manek

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to marry with Faroza. He raises a question about the legal issue to live together as he says, “. . . marry your fiancé! You both plan to live here illegally. We know how to get at the truth. Stop lying! ‘I’m her uncle, officer. I cannot marry my niece.’ ‘Are you kidding? We know y’all marry your cousins.’ ‘Yes officer; but not our nieces’” (p. 64). Feroza and Manek both are victim here of the cultural shifts. The officer threatens them and forces for an unethical work. It is an example of a humiliation done by the American officers to the people of the non-American communities. No one is really responsible about their ethical issues and responsibilities. Some of the people take wrong decisions as it is said by the officer, “She had no uncle in America. Her so-called ‘uncle’ was in fact her fiancé. He wished to point out that she was making false statements; would she now speak the truth?” (p. 61). Questions arouse on the narrative truths.

It is a serious question that whether they are really victim as shown in the above narratives or they make some wrong decisions and create the false narrative on the experiences of the different geographical borderlands? Common people are really victim of the false narratives or it happens as it is said in the novel. Anyway, the victimizations are continued either in the name of ethnicity, race, culture or the gender. Especially the women are suffered in this way or the other. Though the wars on identity issues are over, pain and sufferings are still fresh and it is better to rewrite the history from the perspectives of the insulted and injured. The narratives used in the novel excavate the wrong practices of the ill intended people.

Khutlibai questions on social practices

of racial supremacy and American cultural hegemony. Khutlibai and Zareen are much worried about victimization of the women at all but Feroza talks about the special cases and pitiable condition of the migrated people. She raises the issues of Hispanic people, their mental poverty, and the job insecurity. She says, “To hell with you and your damn country. I will go back!” (p. 64). Feroza protests the American hegemony from the side of the insulted and injured people. Her education empowers her to take a bold decision and to create a road map for her future. Zareen does not agree easily what Feroza says. She questions about Feroza’s long stay in America. Zareen claims that they sent their daughter there to America for few months but now it is almost three years. She forces her to marry and stay there or to be back to her nation but Feroza disagrees. She claims that work and education are important than marriage. Works and self-earnings are essential for independency.

Zareen explains about herself and their family attachment with different examples to convince her daughter for marriage but she disagrees. Connecting the painful history of women, she convinces them to not to force for marrying and bearing children without income. She rejects living within poverty. Feroza seems as a leading girl among her friends as it is said, “Feroza found Mala weeping hysterically. Her hair hung in long strands about her face, as if she or someone had savagely pulled it. Her silk sari was crumpled and disorderly . . . she wailed, ‘*Hai Bhagvan*’” (p. 252). Suffering of women and ill intentional cultural practices are grave problems explored in *An American Brat*. The novel accounts on women sufferings and cultural experiences with their pain

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and protest history in the dislocated location.

Sidhwa's *An American Brat*, 1994, thematically makes a coverage of the sub-continental periphery where she was born. It exposes the boundaries of cosmopolitan cultural practices through the experiences of Feroza that begins from Lahore in Pakistan and shifts up to America. It raises the issues of cultural shifts which readers can feel as a palpable presence beneath the characters and tales of a particular time and place. And herein, the cosmopolitan charm is an ironic representation to the borderland literature based on the experiences of the people of the third world countries. Sidhwa politicizes the cultural biasness that people experience in the different cultural communities. She exposes them through narratives of the insulted and injured. Here, in *An American Brat*, she exposes the difficulties of the cultural shifts through child narrator and the travelers.

Sidhwa's *An American Brat* is an accounting of a distorted Pakistani girl Feroza who has collected memories in the adulthood that supports to create a new road map of her life. She writes about her experience-based insights that she has collected from Lahore to America. A young immigrant, Feroza Ginwalla's parents are worried about her future. Though the novel was published in 1994 it is written in the flashback stories of 1978. It covers the political history of Former Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who was under the house arrest and was threatened for death penalty in General Zia's new regime. Political speeches and guidelines divided the Pakistani people in favor and against of the ruling party. Democratic fights

inspired to the majority of youngsters and they advocated for freedom. The freedom fighters wanted to come back to their motherland to fight against biasness and Feroza is one among them who spoke against the religious conflicts and cultural biasness. Religious and cultural disharmonies are bad for the common citizens; however, the people are victimized of the divide and rule systems either in the name of culture or in the issues of geographical demarcations.

Pakistan was crawling in a difficult situation as a new nation that has to establish its own identity. After the pain of partition as it was in crisis of the political ethics, people tried to shift to the developed nations. Many scholars and youngsters were in the mood to leave their nation but they could not escape away from the love of nationhood. Among the victims of the politics is a 16-years girl Feroza who escaped away to America. She went there in force and pushing of her parents rather than her choice. She was more rigid and conservative despite her parents' efforts to be moderate.

The Ginwalla family is Parsee, members of a small group who follow the teachings of Zoroastrianism. Parsees emigrated from Iran to the Indian sub-continent to avoid religious persecution, and the Ginwalla family felt secure in Pakistan under Bhutto's rule. Zareen, Feroza's mother, tells her husband that they are secured after they got Bhutto as an elected leader who helps for their cultural rights. Feroza and her mother want to keep them not as a Muslim but they want to keep them only as the women, but not as a woman who creates a cultural disharmony. For them, the racial, cultural, geographical and gender based boundaries are not acceptable.

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They are open-minded and they want to unite the women for their rights.

Feroza saves her from succumbing to extremism. The Ginwallas make the decision to send Feroza to America for a few months to stay with her uncle, Manek Junglewalla. Tenacious and deliberate Feroza is overcome by the freedom allowed to her in the states. She spent her three-month-holiday quietly and without much tension she sits there in a permanent way. Once again, she visits her home and family in Pakistan and she explains about her diasporic experiences. Though she is worried about her home and culture, she has to live in America for her education. She returns to America and falls in love with a Jewish boy instead of marrying with a Parsee. Her family's reaction hurts her as they try to pull her back from her decision.

Zareen's main focus is to make Feroza back from her decision but she does not fail to endow complexity into the steps to go ahead. All members of the family, no matter how small their role is given in realistic form she gets aimed to plan for a big event. Feroza's cousin Manek is perhaps one of the most compelling characters in the book. Having lived in America for some years before Feroza arrives, he is her guide and mentor through the streets of New York City and Cambridge, Massachusetts. He schools her on what it's like to be an American. Manek provides a keen look into what many immigrants must become in order to survive the assimilation process if they are to be safe in American society, even changing his name at work to "Mike" so that the guys in the office feel more comfortable. He fails in his own decision in the cases of marriage and other cases.

Zoroastrian belief is that once a girl has married outside the faith, she is considered unnatural and acting against nature, never being allowed back into the faith. The children in such marriages are considered to have corrupt "spiritual genetics" and are also exempt from the faith. Feroza's family firmly believes and is willing to do anything that takes to prevent this damnation in Feroza's life.

Women and Feminist Revolt

An American Brat is about the memories of Feroza who is victim of the distorted cultural practice. Sidhwa writes about her own experiences and shows through different characters. *An American Brat* picturizes then socio-cultural difficulties that women faced while migrating from one cultural community to the other. Rashmi Gaur states that Sidhwa's novel has, . . . "somewhat loose, episodic structure. Much of its comic energy and exuberance derive from a string of gags or comic episodes. However, the novel has memorable characters, 'individual; but not atypical'" (Gaur, p. 11). With its sprightly dialogue and ironical tone, the novel not only deals with her autobiographical periphery, but also encompasses people with deep historical consciousness. Monolithic national categories in the novel does not apply to the western ethos, which Sidhwa tries to narrow the cultural and geographical conflicts. She remains as a great novelist. According to R. K. Dhawan and Novy Kapadia, Bapsi Sidhwa is the great Urdu poet of the sub-continent, and Faiz Ahmed Faiz has praised Bapsi Sidhwa for her caustic wit, racy style, genial comedy and she makes shrewd observations of human behaviors. Faiz compares her with V. S. Naipaul and R. K. Narayan.

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An American Brat takes references from partition history that was carried out violently. The effect of the violence has been very painful even after the elapse of half a century: "Partition retains its pre-eminence even today, despite a couple of wars or our borders and wave after wave of communal violence" (Menon and Bhasin, "Abducted" 1). In the partition violence of 1947, at least one hundred thousand abductions of women on both sides of the border are reported to have taken place that is mentioned in Menon and Bhasin's essays. As said by women advocates Sidhwa shows the painful history through the stories of women experiences. Male committed crimes are charged to have done by women and they are punished badly. The traumatic history of the partition violence is interlinked in *An American Brat*. The events shown in the novel are about women experiences and one among them is Feroza's rape in America:

Some specific features of 'communal' crimes against women: their brutality, their extreme sexual violence and their collective nature. The range of sexual violation explicit in the above accounts-stripping; parading naked; mutilating and disfiguring; tattooing or branding the breasts and genitalia with triumphal slogans; amputating breasts; knifing open the womb; raping, of course; killing fetuses . . . is shocking not only for its savagery, but for what it tells us about women as objects in male constructions of their own honor. Women's sexuality symbolizes 'manhood'; its description is a matter of such shame and dishonor that it has to be avenged. Yet, with the cruel logic of all such violence, it is women ultimately who are most violently

dealt with as a consequence. (Menon and Bhasin, "Borders," p. 43)

Such painful events and incidents should be re-written from the perspectives of the insulted and injured. For Menon and Bhasin, the violence is equated to the women in different parts of the world. They focus that the family honor and acceptances of each-others mistakes are the methods to make them free from violence that is shown in Zaitoon and Cyrus's conversation. Individual as well as communal voices of victims are included in the revisionist history by Menon and Bhasin. The location of women abduction is intersectional of all these forces, rather than their periphery. Another theorist, Aparna Basu supports Menon and Bhasin and writes, "Hindu women were often accepted by their families because of economic failure. People had come from Pakistan as refugees and had no money. They did not have a woman to do the housework-a housewife" (Basu, p. 276). Basu claims that they accepted to the abducted, seduced and raped women not to honor them but to manage the household. Recovery program at least made woman available to work in their homes.

Mrs. Remeshwari Nehru was among those who felt that "abducted women should not be forced to return to their original homes" (Qtd in Basu p. 279). Rameshwari seems in the side of refusing such treatment and their unwanted recovery. Thus, the notion of recovery itself was accompanied with state violence. Although, the state seemingly acted affected communities. State's action of the recovery operation turns out to be a violent one. Butalia, in this regard writes, ". . . conversion, rape and forcible marriage . . . the fate

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that in all likelihood awaited many women” (p. 43). Sometimes the women themselves resisted-out of fear of ‘a second dislocation’, a repeat of the trauma, another uprooting, or of non-acceptance (p. 48). Such oppressed women have always lived being loosed social prestigious thing more than reputed social values. However, women often played out multiple overlapping roles to create their identities. In this regard, Butalia writes, “. . . the women who committed mass suicide could have done so out of fear of rape; equally, they could have been acting, at that particular point, as members of their community and class” (p. 62). For those women who resisted rescue they can perhaps say that they acted on behalf of themselves, and their children, born and unborn.

Thus, the understanding of agency too needs to consider the nation related with community, class, religion and gendered based for freedom place. In such regards, historical silence is compounded by families. Feminist advocates raise some serious issues that the insulted and injured women have painful experiences in the cultural shifts.

Othered Women

During riots, instead of accepting the insulted and injured women as members of their family and behaving well, the victims were ‘othered’ that is shown in *An American Brat*. Such women were subjected to stripping, mutilating, disfiguring, tattooing or branding the breasts, raping and pushing the stick into their pubic which are narrated from the feminist perspectives. The official records suggest that abducted, seduced and raped women and insulted children should be viewed as war babies and left behind in the country where they were

born. Sometimes, women were to bear the responsibilities of taking care of their older children, who were born before the rape. On the other hand, there were some infants as the fruit of violent rape cases. Thus, although the stand of the government debate was that the children were born to abducted women and they were to be defined as abducted persons—we can see that these children became defined as the ‘undesirables’ of the family through practices of the state.

It is the state which insisted in keeping the women in the first place for women’s identities and belongings. They mediated for welcoming the women in their original homes where their children could stay with their mothers. Therefore, it followed that all cases which could not be absorbed within the original families came under the power and protection of the state. One must remember here that the women who were abducted could be seen from two different perspectives . . . the perspective of the family (whether natal or marital) which had lost them, and the perspective of the family which had abducted them.

Many of the women who had been abducted, subjected to sexual violation, and humiliated, were fairly well, perhaps harmoniously, absorbed into the families of their abductors in the course of time. But the state in both, India and Pakistan, viewed these women from the perspective of the family to which they had originally belonged. According to Menon and Bhasin, on the process of recovery agreement sought to recover the abducted women speedily and restores them to their families. Politicians claim that they could forget all the properties and other things but could not forget the traumatic abduction, seduction, rape and

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conversion. Regarding recovery issues, the All India Congress Committee, in November 17, 1947, passed a resolution for recovery.

Conclusion

Sidhwa's *An American Brat* collects the narratives of insulted and injured people. The novel, straightforwardly addresses to the women's problems through the narratives of Feroza that reflect Sidhwa's own experiences. She writes about women suffering through which she advocates for socio-cultural equality. The collected memories of Feroza, Khutlibai and Zareen are representative pictures of the women experiences whose lives are distorted in various ways. Manek, though he is male, is equally suffered in America

is because of the problem of the cultural shifts. American officers threaten to Feroza and Manek as they exercises the power. Cultural and religious challenges that Feroza has faced in America are the outputs of the distorted cultural practices. The novel also discusses on the traditional mindset of the women in Lahore-Pakistan and other Hindu, Sikhs and Muslim communities of India and Pakistan. This paper focuses to the difficulties of people to adjust in the new places. On the basis of above observations, this paper claims that it is better to be flexible in the new cultural environment. Cultural and geographical rigidities are the grave problems that create socio-cultural disharmony.

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