
From Silence to Self-Realization: Exploring the Transformation of Female Identity in Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat***Ch. Vennela**

Lecturer in English, Pithapur Rajah's Government College (A), Kakinada

Abstract

Bapsi Sidhwa's "An American Brat" is an exploration of female identity as it evolves through migration, cultural conflict, and personal awakening of individuality. The novel follows Feroza Ginwalla, a young Parsi woman whose journey from Pakistan to the United States becomes the turning point in her transformation. Even though she comes from a wealthy Parsi family she is silenced by the weight of patriarchal expectations. Feroza gradually discovers her own voice as she encounters new social values, and challenges in a foreign land. Her relocation not only destabilizes inherited traditions but also opens pathways towards individuality.

This paper examines how Bapsi Sidhwa frames silence as social conditioning imposed by patriarchal structure and how exposure to different environment enables its disruption. Feroza's progression from compliance to resistance illustrates the complexities women face when they try to balance tradition and modernity. Her experiences ranging from the struggle to assimilate in the foreign land to the assertion of independence in relationships and choices reflect the self-realization of women who are conditioned for many years in the name of tradition.

An American Brat symbolizes the journey from silence to self-realization as a universal struggle for women seeking a place in patriarchal contexts. Feroza's story demonstrates how migration and exposure to diverse cultural frameworks can lead to empowerment, allowing female identity to emerge as dynamic, and transformative. This paper focusses on the transformation of female identity from social conditioning to self-realization.

Keywords: Female identity, social conditioning, silence, cultural conflict, self-realization, identity

Introduction

In post-colonial literature, the diasporic narrative often plays an important trajectory for identity formation. Bapsi Sidhwa, one of Pakistan's most distinguished English-language novelists, delves in her 1993 novel, *An American Brat* explains the journey of the protagonist, Feroza Ginwalla, as a protected and pampered Parsee girl in Lahore, whose identity is defined by communal modesty and the religious fundamentalism of 1980's Lahore

to transformation into a self-reliant individual after her migration to the United States of America.

Feroza's move to America is not merely a geographic shift, it is a transition from a culture of and silence, obedience and social conditioning to individualism and self-articulation. This paper examines how Bapsi Sidhwa uses the diaspora experience as a catalyst to break the traditional submissive socially accepted feminine role of the Protagonist Feroza and the migration allows Feroza to reconstruct a self where she wanted to build her own identity following her heart without restricting herself to the rigid patriarchal norms of her Parsi community.

Silence as a Cultural and Gendered Norm

In the beginning of the Novel, Feroza Ginwalla is introduced as a rebellious but superficially compliant daughter raised in the Parsi community of Lahore. Feroza's father is a rich Businessman and her mother Zareen runs an NGO. The Hypocrisy of Feroza's parents can be understood in one context where Feroza's father does not want her to act in a school play." But he would not have his daughter fool around with Muslim boys-or any boys" (p.17). The same goes with Zareen, Feroza's mother. Zareen believes that progressive mindset is equivalent to wearing western dress code and attending parties as socialite. The meaning of individualism and self-reliance is new term for the parents of Feroza.

Feroza was born and brought in an elite Parsee family in Lahore. The Parsee community being minority in Pakistan were not happy with rigid religious fanaticism of the Government. The Parsee community gathered over drinks and they tried their preserve their culture. Feroza grew up in an environment where prioritizing honour, silence, and obedience -especially for women is the norm of the day. They progression of women is just restricted to wearing western outfit and attending parties.is In Lahore, female identity is deeply rooted in social etiquette and conformity.

The Parsee community being a minority community believed that they have the necessity to preserve their culture. In the name of the preservation of culture, the women of the community were socially conditioned and brain washed from their childhood.

Every Parsee girl grew up warned of the catastrophe that could take the shape of a good looking non -Parsee man. Marrying outside her community could exclude the girl from community matters and certainly bar her from her faith. (p. 17)

These expectations create silence and obedience as a virtue. The narrative reveals the early stages of conditioning where silence is internalized. Feroza refrains from openly challenging her father's authority even when she disagrees his decision to send her abroad. The female identity in the novel is shaped by silence and obedience.

Catalyst -Migration to the United States of America

Feroza was becoming more and more like the girls in the streets—meek, submissive, and afraid of her own shadow. I think we should send Feroza to America for a short holiday. Just for three or four months. Travel will broaden her outlook. (p. 17)

These are the words of Zareen, Feroza's mother. Zareen believed that Feroza is going to become a docile girl shaped by religious fanaticism of the then Pakistani Government which makes her as turn her into an unsuitable bride in the Parsi Community. The idea behind sending Feroza to the United States of America is not to turn her into a matured and a self-reliant individual but to groom her as the perfect bride for an eligible Parsi Bridegroom. This shows the hypocrisy of Feroza's parents. Feroza's parents represent the mindset of the parents who are socially conditioned by the society that a woman has to groom herself in order to become a prospective bride. People believed that education is just an ornament which will attract the bridegroom's families from an elite background. Self-grooming and following the social etiquette should be the priority of women in order to fit into the traditional structure of the society. Silence and obedience are considered as virtue.

Feroza's arrival in the United States of America acts as a cultural shock that shatters her previous framework of reality. Her initial encounters at the airport, the aggressive questioning at customs the life style of New York make her feel disconnected. When her uncle Manek tries to proudly boast about the American culture by degrading their culture as Third World countries, she vehemently retaliates against him.

You Third World native yourself! It's my time, and my life, and I'm answerable to no one but my parents and my God! (p. 77)

Manek tried to show the American way of life style. Initially Feroza was terrified by the incidents she faced in YMCA. She was discriminated because of her race. She lived with Manek and his roommate Jamil for few days and she slowly understood how New York had shaped them. "It became clearer to Feroza that to be this far from home to cope with strangers and mysterious rites, was itself a test" (p. 116). Even if she was only a girl"? Explore possibilities that were beginning to palpitate and twinkle -as yet recognizable-on evanescent new horizon" (p. 117).

This is the turning point in the life of Feroza. She tries to adapt the new life style and want to experience it. She struggles with American customs such as dating, clothing, and independence. This dislocation forces her to identify the concept of identity. Initially, she feels alienated, but gradually she learns to navigate the new culture. The identity crisis is central to her transformation as she tries to balance her Parsi-Pakistani roots with her American experiences.

Education and Self-Reliance

As Feroza moves to Twin Falls, Idaho, and later to Denver, her identity undergoes a radical shift. The American college system encourages the very thing her upbringing discouraged which is questioning and rational thinking. Feroza's roommate Jo serves as a catalyst in the transformation of her personality. In the beginning Feroza conversations with Jo were hesitant. But Jo helped her to adapt to the new way of life. Feroza and Jo rented an apartment and she was thrilled that for the time in her life she was being independent. Feroza got her first part-time job in the registration office. That is the first time she started earning

and fending for herself. Managing a budget and working part-time jobs shifted her view from being a "daughter to be married off" to a self-reliant individual. With the support of Jo, Feroza learned car driving, which is the initial step for her self-reliance.

Feroza slowly understood the value of freedom in self-reliance in the United States of America. The story parallelly navigated the incidents happening in Lahore where Zareen works for an NGO and tries to exhibit that she sympathizes with the poor but when it comes to her mindset she is deeply restricted to her the rigid traditions of her parsi communities that a girl should marry within her community.

Feroza visits Jo's house and she understands how Jo's parents respect their children's opinions without interfering in their lives so much. She considers it as a complete contrast to her close family where everyone has the right to interfere in one's lives. They consider they are guiding the younger generations with their advice but they are trying to control the voice of the younger generations expecting unquestionable obedience.

Feroza's parents, her aunts, and uncles, for all their assertions of being broad minded and modern, would expect unquestioning obedience on certain matters, like the relationship between various family member, and between boys and girls, and would view the consternation any straying from the established path. (p. 209)

The University of Denver played a crucial role in Feroza's life. She got associated with people from different countries -Hispanic, Arabic, Iranian and Indian students. Feroza worked in a bar as an assistant to the bartender. Feroza shared room with Rhonda and Gwen and her interactions with Gwen helped her realize the difficulties faced a young black woman and how she valued her education. Feroza's worldview has widened with the association of people from different communities and it helped to view from a different perspective.

Feroza returns to Pakistan for holidays and she thinks that she is misfit in her own land. When her mother Zareen tries to hint the topic of marriage, she rejects it vehemently claiming that she cannot leave her Graduation just to marry. This is the first time Feroza vocalized her opinion clearly to her parents. "I'm not settling anywhere without a career," Feroza said. "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).

The Conflict of Hybridity – Parsee Tradition vs Relationship with David

The climax of Feroza's self-realization occurs through her relationship with David, a Jewish-American. This relationship forces a confrontation between her newfound autonomy and her ancestral roots. When Feroza announces her decision to marry David, the Parsee community in Lahore is outraged. The elders in the family, neighbours try to brainwash Zareen and Cyrus. They explain that she would be an outcast if she marries outside the parsi community. If a Parsi young man marries outside his faith he will not be considered as outcast. This is never questioned by the elders. When the young ones try to side with Feroza, Jeroo and Behram's daughter Bunny tries to convince them she is marrying a nice person, she is silenced. This explains the narrow-minded nature developed as a result of social conditioning. Zareen travels to America to break up the engagement. Zareen tries

to manipulate Feroza that if she marries outside her faith she has to cut ties with her family. But Feroza retaliates and stands by her decision. This explains the assertive side of Feroza who has clear vision about her life.

You won't be permitted to attend her funeral rites – or mine or you father's! Do you know how selfish you are, thinking only of yourself? (p. 278). I'm only getting married. If the family wants to fell disgraced, let them!

Zareen humiliates David's religion and family which creates a rift between Feroza and David Bapsi Sidhwa masterfully shows that while Zareen succeeds in ending the engagement, she fails to transform Feroza's identity. Feroza's heartbreak does not lead her back to Lahore; it leads her deeper into herself.

Self-Realization

Feroza embraces love and independence, her family back in Pakistan views the relationship as a betrayal of cultural and religious norms. This tension highlights the clash between patriarchal expectations and female autonomy. Feroza's refusal to conform to arranged marriage traditions signifies her assertion of selfhood. Feroza understands that she craves for independence rather than silent obedience. She identifies that she wants to live a self-reliant live without the vigilant eyes of elders who claim that they are protecting but in reality, they are conforming her to silence. Feroza identifies that this could be possible only in America and she migrates to the United States of America to live a life where can take the decisions of her life without the interference of narrow-minded relatives.

It wouldn't matter if he was a Parsee or of another faith. She would be more sure of herself, and she wouldn't let anyone interfere. If the priests in Lahore and Karachi did not let her enter the fire temple, she would go to one in Bombay." Her break with David still hurt so much, especially the circumstances surrounding the break. If she flew again and again May be one day, she'd soar to that self contained place from which there was no falling, if there was such a place. (p. 317). These lines reflect the self-realization of Feroza. Feroza's journey is marked by her negotiation between tradition and modernity.

Conclusion

Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat* is a study of female identity as it traverses cultures, values, and personal aspirations. Feroza's journey from silence to self-realization illustrates the ways in which gendered identities are shaped, and transformed under multiple socio-cultural forces.

The novel shows that female silence is often a product of social conditioning rather than a personal choice. Through Feroza's experiences in Lahore and the United States, Bapsi Sidhwa critiques the subtle mechanism of patriarchal silence and unquestionable obedience. Feroza's father Cyrus sends Zareen to break the relationship between Feroza and David. Women were brainwashed in such a way that they feel that they are responsible for preserving the traditions of their community. Feroza's ultimate self-realization is not blind conformation to the hypocritical values of her Parsee community. But she believes in the

supreme power of Ahura Mazda, their God who loves them unconditionally. She wants to take the decisions of her life without any kind of social pressure. This transformation—from imposed silence to vocalizing her opinion accurately and clearly offers readers a model for interpreting female identity not as a fixed artifact but as interplay of choice, and courage. Feroza does not completely abandon her cultural roots; instead, she creates a hybrid identity that embraces both tradition and modernity.

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