
Acculturation or Assimilation of the Diasporic Individual in Bapsi Sidwa's *An American Brat*

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ABSTRACT

Migration in the entire world has created the concept of 'Diaspora' which remains a social and political upheaval for the existence of the Subalterns. The Subalterns have to face the second grade treatment in new foreign set-ups, and have a need to acculturate themselves with the new identity and assimilate their indigenous identity. These victimized individuals raise voice against the discrimination of the social, cultural and political setup of the country they live in. This has led to a new race of destabilized individuals who look forth for an identity which might allow them to get assimilated in the new culture they live in. This paper focuses and studies on whether the individual really gets acculturated or assimilated or remains consistently the 'other' by the analysis of Bapsi Sidwa's novel *An American Brat*.

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Migration in the entire world has created the concept of 'Diaspora' which remains a social and political upheaval for the existence of the Subalterns. The Subalterns have to face the second grade treatment in new foreign set-ups, and have a need to acculturate themselves with the new identity and assimilate their indigenous identity. These victimized individuals raise voice against the discrimination of the social, cultural and political setup of the country they live in. This has led to a new race of destabilized individuals who look forth for an identity which might allow them to get assimilated in the new culture they live in. This paper focuses and studies on whether the individual really gets acculturated or assimilated or remains consistently the 'other' by the analysis of Bapsi Sidwa's novel *An American Brat*. Acculturation for many transnational immigrants is essentially a contested, dynamic, and dialogical process.

In particular, examples from the Indian diaspora are used to demonstrate that such a dialogical process involves a constant moving back and forth between various cultural voices that are connected to various sociocultural contexts and are shaped by issues of power and constructions of otherness (Bhatia 2007, 2008, 2010; Bhatia and Ram 2004, 2009).

Diasporas and Acculturation

Acculturation for many immigrants is essentially always time tested, progressive process. These individuals are shaped by issues of power and constructions of otherness. Diasporas always feel that there are connections left with their homeland and they feel a need to recognize themselves as a select collective community. Toloyan (1996) has talked about it. Diasporas are formed due to the immigrant's consistent need to get their culture represented in the host culture and they experience erasure through intentional efforts on the part of the host nation. The host

nation promote assimilation and silence the culture of the other there remains the consistent tussle between here and there, homeland and hostland, the self and the other.

The identity negotiation on the part of Feroza begins when she is marked as the other. The otherness is constructed in relation to dress they wear, in relation to the food they take, in relation to their culture etc. Assimilation cannot be pointed out as complete integration in to the host culture. The immigrant only pursues a better strategy than remaining marginalized or separated but to acculturate and assimilate. The voices of Zareena and Feroza assert asymmetrical relationship with the opinion they have about the host cultures they live in. They rework the different voices related to cultural otherness. The voices remain assimilated, but identity issues exist as coming to terms with their identity and negotiating and renegotiating happens with their selfhood. The dialogical model of acculturation and assimilation presents the tensions, contradictions and challenges prevalent in hyphenated identities of the immigrants in the entire world.

Diasporic literature analyses the sentiment and feelings associated with rootlessness and alienation and the thoughts of their home country. In the novel, *An American Brat*, the move away from their native land would have been for individual reasons, financial downturn, or way of life. The literature of the Diaspora has always been a potential base for representing the subject of various writers who portray life and individual identity impacted by various factors of getting disengaged from the nation to which they belonged. Women are affected by the narrow minded religious imposition which took place during General Zia's rule and such laws propagated gender discrimination and degradation of women. This novel delineates the cultural clash which gets generated in the New World they enter in and the indigenous traditions they carry. Acculturation and assimilation necessitates their transformation and their progeny look forward to find and fix their identity in the host nation.

The storyline kick starts with the life of Feroza, a young girl belonging to the Parsee community. Feroza is sent to the US by her mother Zareen and father Cyrus Ginwala, who is the owner of a sports goods store in Pakistan. The political situation is quite serious with General Zia in power in 1978. Zareen, a Parsee sees a lot of cultural turmoil in the nation. She was a Bhutto supporter and she could see how her daughter Feroza is becoming more conservative like her Muslim friends. Politics has so much entered the social lives that from the street sweeper to the business tycoon, all are affected and particularly it's tentacles clutch women and determine how they should dress, 'how they should conduct themselves even within the four walls of their homes' (171). As opined by Narendra Kumar the writers like Bapsi Sidwa are in the words of Rushdie writing back to the center (Narendra Kumar 9).

The political control of Zia's military-Islamic regime strictly oppresses the broad minded Parsees. Zareen thinks that the only option left with her to keep her daughter away from this Islamic regime is to send Feroza to the US for a few months to stay with her uncle Manek, a doctoral candidate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Manek, a Parsee has a similar struggle in adjusting and assimilating to the American lifestyle but he could do so slowly changing his name to Mike to work for NASA at Houston. Feroza is convinced by Manek to do hotel management, a practical field at a junior college in Idaho. Manek, however still believes in his culture, although acculturated to American way of life. He marries a submissive Parsee wife Aban. Feroza however decides to marry David Press, an American Jew. Zareen, her mother being highly conservative comes to the US to stop the marriage. She writes a letter to her family about her intention to marry an exceptionally timid, awesome partner at the University although she very well knew that her grandmas and Zoroastrian faith would never accept it.

Zareen criticises Feroza and tries to convince her when she reminds of Parsi customs: "You are

robbing us of a dimension of joy we have a right to expect. What will you bring to the family if you marry this David? His family won't get involved with ours. But that doesn't matter so much... What matters is your life-it will be so dry. Just husband, wife and may be a child rattling like loose stones in this huge America! (278). However, Zareen finds out that David was a perfect match for her but she couldn't agree to it as such marriages were forbidden by their community especially for girls.

She is worried about what would happen to her daughter as the Parsees forbid marriage outside their small community. The community would consider it a crime against nature and it would mean a life of spiritual exile. The real inhibition to acculturation now crops up in the novel. A Parsee woman cannot marry a Non-Parsee without being excommunicated from the Zoroastrian faith but a Parsee man can marry a non-Parsee woman invoking scorn from the community. Sidwa questions this law of the Parsees at the same time points to the hurdles for acculturation and assimilation in Parsee faith. Feroza fails in her attempt but her inclination to stand for rebellion against barriers for acculturation remains towards the end of the novel. Sidwa through her picturization of Parsee customs, ceremonies, beliefs, legends etc., presents the various aspects of Parsee's life in Pakistani diaspora. The shift of locations from Lahore to various cities in America amid the cultural clashes, the adjustments in the US all lead the timid, young Pakistani Parsee girl to move from conservativeness to assimilative experiences. The character of Zareen portrays the increasing feeling of tension and displacement that Parsee community feels in Pakistan. Zareen is worried about her daughter's orthodox, conservative nature and narrow minded nature being imposed by laws prevalent in Pakistan. She is worried when Feroza objected to her mother wearing a sleeveless sari blouse. She tells Feroza: "Look we're Parsee, everybody knows we dress differently. When I was 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, woman 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! (10).

Zareena hopes that Feroza will think differently once she is sent of US on a short trip: "Travel will broaden her outlook; get this puritanical rubbish out of her head. (14) She is sent off and Feroza feel so joyful that she was going to America: , "I'm going to America, I'm going to America! Until her doubts slowly ebb and her certainty, too, caught the rhythm of her happiness. To the land of glossy magazines, of "Be witched" and Star Trek", if rock stars and jeans...(27) She follows the Zoroastrian faith of being obedient to her parents but as she reaches America she gets changed. Feroza experiences the cultural clash, the alienation at the very beginning. All her excitement is surpassed by the inhuman treatment by the custom officials as her Pakistani passport opens from the wrong end. It follows with a baggage of questions as to how long she would stay, where she would stay, who would support her, resident or visitor etc. She is directed for inspection a second time after collecting her luggage. She could not cope with the dominant technology used by the Americans and is quite unfamiliar with the escalator. An elderly American couple helps her to get on and off the moving staircase. Her stranger and horrific experience is when she is locked out in the YMCA fire-stairs. She feels totally alienated, alone and caught up when she is locked up there and all cries for help fall to no avail. Her screams finally attract a Japanese man who opens the door for her. Like an uncle, he scolds her for her dangerous act and warns her: Never do that ... never! You could be murdered... No one would know. All kinds of shitty people... drugs! (94) The ugly side and the bright side of the US are shown with balance by Bapsi Sidwa.

Zareen is able to understand and reveal Feroza's mindset which was effected and pestered by the narrow-minded socio-world of politics and practices in Pakistan. Zareen couldn't bear the

presence of fundamentalism as Parsees had liberal personalities and had decent practices when compared to that of the Pakistanis.

Acculturation and assimilation involves the purging of individuals on grounds of social contrasts and set of experiences along with practices in various locales. The novel encompasses comparative grounds through the character of Feroza Ginwalla to understand even the complexities involved in American culture and way of life. She understands that keeping her own culture intact would not allow her to embrace the characteristics of the Western world nor would the Western world allow different class and cultural constructs in specific packets. Manek, Feroza and even Zareen have interest in American culture and each understands it in their own propensities with their own perceptions. Manek becomes acculturated in America to its culture and customs and changes his name to get identified and assimilated on his part. Feroza dislikes the way of life in the US as Manek had mimicked the coloniser's way of incorporating their supremacy. When Feroza meets Jo, her American roommate, her way of dressing, her mannerisms change, and she starts feeling how culturally displaced she was in America. She quickly adopts to the American ways, acts, talks and dresses like Jo and turns out highly confident and self-assertive. She learnt driving, drinks and dances; starts flirting with an Indian student Shashi at the University of Denver where she studies hotel management; even enters a love affair with a young American Jew David Press.

Feroza's three months stay in US turns up into a four-year study and she really becomes an American brat. The lifestyle in the US changed her fundamentalistic nature into an independent nature of acceptance and liberalism. Manek's words: "you will love New York" (66) become true for her. She fits so well into the American social circle and experiences great love for David and plans to marry him which points to the acceptance of acculturation and assimilation. Women are the most marginalized and discriminated gender in any society and it is through the characterization of Feroza and Zareen the trauma of the expatriate, the chaotic condition and alienation faced by the people of the Diaspora is well exposed towards the end of the novel too. Feroza returns to Lahore to spend her winter holidays where she could see how Islamic ideals have overtaken secularism in Pakistan. It is very apt to quote Fanon who wrote about the confusion of identity and culture within individuals who get access to dynamic change.

Culture for Fanon encompasses all the practices of a group, which are always in a state of dynamic change. In his book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, he explains the evil of colonial domination which always acts to wither the process of change. He says: "By the time a century or two of exploitation has passed there comes about a veritable emaciation of the stock of national culture. It becomes a set of automatic habits, some traditions of dress and a few broken-down institutions. Little movement can be discerned in such remnants of culture; there is no real creativity and no overflowing life... we find a culture which is rigid in the extreme, or rather what we find are the dregs of culture, its mineral strata (1985: 191) She couldn't feel fit into the society any longer and feels so rootless that she decides to live in America. Zareen and Feroza are not prisoners of their culture but they challenge the community in which they live.

Zareena's thinking is changed once she is in America and she relaxes her stringent attitude towards David. As she starts explaining Zoroastrian faith and customs, David rejects her opinion and talks high of Jewish culture which shows how people of the West still impose superiority over East. David suddenly feels that his culture is different to Feroza's culture and they can't live together and hence changes his decision of marriage. Feroza feels the state of shock and insecurity in America which diasporic individuals feel when they encounter the cultural clash. She recalls her past life, her precious identity, her society, her culture held together by their community in Pakistan. However, she decides that her identity is further threatened by the Islamic government rather than in America where happiness and freedom are still acceptable.

Feroza who was taught narrow mindedness in her country; had a liberal Parsee faith; encounters western culture in the United States. Sidwa could bring the concepts of acculturation and assimilation into the foreground. The novel brings out who Feroza was and what she becomes towards the end of the novel. The contrasts in culture are further exposed as David too flaunts his Jewish culture in response to Parsee culture.

Conclusion

Sidwa through Feroza brings out ways of developing positive outlook - the need to experience cultural clashes; experience the diasporic trauma; and the expatriate turmoil. Bhabha argues that such multicultural policies and transnational behaviours are needed to "entertain and encourage... cultural diversity, containing it, a transparent norm is constituted, a norm given by the host or dominant culture, which says that these other cultures are fine, but we must be able to locate them within our own grid" (Bhabha, 208)

A community or individuals who become more fluid, can bring about a balance in the world, that was left behind, and the new one which they face and the effective response would be through acculturation and assimilation.

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