

## Transnational Journey in Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*

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### **Abstract**

*Bapsi Sidhwa is a Pakistani American novelist and all her novels explore women's position and condition in particular settings and describe the development of Asian women from passivity to the life of action and also focuses on the psychological factors of the immigrants and their struggle in achieving identity. This work aims at discussing the fictional representation of Pakistani American immigrant characters in the novel *An American Brat*, by Bapsi Sidhwa. For this, the paper will explore how people react when they started to live in new land and their changes as a result of migration and what kind of transformation occurred and the reason behind it. An attempt to analyze the entire gamut of a diasporic individual's social and psychological adjustment, for that it will examine the three stages on their immigration journey such as culture shock, acculturation and reverse culture shock on the characters.*

**Keywords:** culture shock, acculturation, reverse culture shock, adaptation.

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## **Introduction**

Culture can be defined simply as the total way of life of a particular group of people in daily lives. It includes everything such as attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, feelings, norms, behaviors, and personality, etc of the people. There are huge varieties of cultures found in the globe and which makes our world so interesting and amazing, so that culture is an interesting area to study. There is no one in the world without the influence of their culture.

Raymond Williams, a well known critic defines culture as 'a whole way of life.' In T. S. Eliot's opinion: "Culture means the way of life of a particular people living together in one place. That culture is made visible in their arts, in their social system, in their habits and customs and in their language." (Eliot, 1962: 120) Culture and literature are mutually related and literature enshrines the cultural aspects of a society including its beliefs, knowledge, values and practices. Edward Said has acknowledged the interrelationship between literature, culture and society thus: "Too often literature and culture are presumed to be politically, even historically innocent; it has regular seemed otherwise to me, and certainly my study of orientalism has convinced me that society and culture can only be understood and studied together" (Said, 1991: 27).

Culture is created by mankind to fulfill their needs and for their development in life and each group created its own. Consciously or unconsciously each and every aspects of culture are registered in everyone's mind from their childhood, but before one gets opportunity to meet other culture, he/she could not understand their own culture and the influence/power of their culture in their life. Cultures share some basic concepts, and the other concepts (which are different) are seen as irrational and contradictory. Mostly, everyone feels that their cultural concepts are correct and logical but no one can judge it because there is no prescribed permanent standard in the world. Neither is superior nor is inferior, it is just different.

This paper will explore how people react when they started to live in new land and their changes as a result of migration and what kind of transformation occurred and the reason behind it. As the literary evidence, this paper will explore/analyze the immigrant characters from the novel, *An American Brat*, by Bapsi sidhwa.

Bapsi Sidwa is a Pakistani American novelist and all her novels explore women's position and condition in particular settings and described the development of Asian women from passivity to the life of action. Sidhwa witnessed the partition of India especially its terrific horrible violence when she was eight and she was an

expatriate in America and these experiences has influenced her works and her novels focuses on the psychological factors of the immigrants and their struggle in achieving identity. Sidhwa skillfully links gender to community, nationality, religion and class, demonstrating the ways in which these various aspects of cultural identity and social structure do not merely affect or reflect one another, but inextricably intertwined.

*An American Brat* highlights the transformation of feroza from traditional – bound conservative one to modernized one. Sidhwa deals the issues like globalization, brain drain from the third world, culture shock and so on. *An American Brat* describes the Americanization of a young Parsi woman. Sidhwa is a Pakistani immigrant so her writings about the United States are from her own perception and she believes that the novel will attract people from both the cultures. *An American Brat*, a story of a young Parsi woman and her journey both in physical and psychological. Though Feroza was a lover of traditional aspects in the beginning, her attitudes had changed because of the influence of American ideologies due to her acculturation and at last she decided to not to go back to her native. In the beginning she was a passive character because she was a Pakistani girl that time and turned as active character as an acculturated American girl.

Feroza's parents were alarmed by the influence of fundamentalistic ideas on Feroza and they wanted to change the ideology of their daughter and they decided to send her America for few months and they believed that the time in America would change Feroza a little as a modern girl. Feroza was sent by her family members and there in the new land she felt culture shock even in the airport itself. She was shocked by the orderly traffic of rushing people, the bright lights and warmed air, the extra ordinary cleanliness and sheen of floors and furnishings, the audacious immensity of the glass and steel enclosed spaces. She faced problem in custom clearance because of her Pakistani passport which was printed from right to left like urdu language and to clarify the doubts customs officials asked few questions and checked the things of Feroza well. Customs officials touched the dresses of Feroza while checking which was not tolerated by Feroza because it was against her tradition. First few months of stay was packed with varied culture shocks.

According to Gender Schema theory by Sandra Bem in 1981, mother teaches their children what it means to be male and female from the culture in which they live. It deals with the internalization of aspects of culture in mind. As a Pakistani, Feroza's grandmother taught her to be meek, submissive and dependent on the male characters of the family and Feroza internalized these ideas. Once landed in America, she understood that in America the theory was quite different, Americans treat all

humans equally and American girls are independent, active, unafraid, and direct. As a Pakistani, Feroza could not accept such approaches and she could not lead her life without depending others. Feroza firmly believed the special code for women to follow. She does not consider men and women equal.

Feroza's grandmother Khutli bai was always conscious in dressing and she considered proper dressing as decency and family's prestige. Khutlibai disliked her daughter's dressing style and expressed as, "you have stopped wearing your sudra and kusti; you prefer to shoe your skin at the waist what kind of example you are setting for child?" (31) While just a few pages back, Zareen claimed before her husband: "I shall dress the way my mother dresses, and I'll dress the way my grandmother dresses! And no one's ever called the junglewala women indecent." (13) Feroza liked to cover her whole body and she did not want to expose and felt such dressing style as decency. She was shocked and felt shy while noticed the dressing style of American women and she could not accept such things in the beginning stage.

Feroza was quite unfamiliar with modern technologies which were used by Americans such as moving staircase, the escalator, etc which made her nervous because even in small storey buildings also Americans were using escalator only and she was surprised by the long line of people waiting for escalator without disturbing others. Feroza found people were carrying their luggage using a cart and she did not know where to get a cart, so she simply asked a help from a young man, and her manner is half apologetic and half appealing for help: "I don't know how to get this,... can you show me?" (*An American Brat* 57) the man smiled and showed her how to insert the dollar bill. After she loaded her suitcase and hand luggage on the cart, her mind was filled with the image of the young American and his candid admiring eyes: "How easily he had talked to her, his gestures open, confident. She wished she could have responded to his readiness to be friends, but she was too self-conscious." (*An American Brat* 58) she was surprised and shocked that no one of the Americans bothered and there was not even a glance or stare at her as which would be in Pakistan.

Bapsi Sidhwa vividly describes the impression of America to a new comer. Adam L. Penenberg rightly calls the novel "a sensitive portrait of how America appears to a new arrival." man or women who enters new place will definitely feel some kind of surprise or culture shock because of the change in both thin and thick level culture change. Thin level changes include changes in food, dress, art, music, architecture, etc and the thick level includes changes in attitudes, thinking, perceptions, behaviour, etc. here as a new comer to America, she felt shocked because of the

changes in culture and which is quite common in all immigrants. Culture shock, which is the first stage in immigrants life in spite of their reason of immigration once they landed in foreign country, the time period of culture shock varies in level which depends on the range of difference exist between the own culture and the new culture. Feroza felt culture shock for some days because America was completely different from the atmosphere which existed in Pakistan. She could not tolerate or understand the things what she believed in the beginning.

Next stage to culture shock is Acculturation, in which people start to borrow or adapt cultural traits from the new culture as a result of prolonged contact. In culture shock stage, individual is new to everything in the new country where as in the acculturation stage, individual gets new contact and started to merge with the new culture. Individual will start to respect both the cultures including home culture and the host culture when he/she understands the reason behind why people are behaving in such manner which is different from the home country.

In *An American Brat*, first Feroza might felt culture shock where as her stay in America made her understand on the concepts of US culture such as individualism, freedom, equality, etc. her uncle Manek taught her everything about the culture of US and step by step she started to accept those things. Manek and Joe, Feroza's friend, made the change in Feroza's attitude. She started liking and enjoying the individualistic freedom in US and thereby she decided to join a course program there and for that instead of asking permission from her parents as a Pakistani girl, she informed her parents that she was going to get admission in college which was selected by her. Family was shocked by this act and understood Feroza was changed. Feroza was enchanted by the America and Americans she encountered and she felt great pleasure in shopping malls, fast food restaurants and modern kitchen appliances which means she had adapted the life style of America. Family members astonished at the change in Feroza.

Feroza decided to marry a Jewish American namely David. When family heard about this, Zareen set out to America to dissuade her rebellious daughter from marrying a non parsi. Feroza did not agree to mother's advice, thus Zareen said, "I should never let you go far away. Look what it's done to you – you've become an American brat!" (*An American Brat* 279) Zareen felt that feroza's marriage to a non parsi would be nothing less than cultural suicide. Feroza did not felt frighten but after Zareen's emphasis on difference between the Zoroastrian and Jewish culture David decided to stop thinking of marrying Feroza. Zareen gone back to Lahore and Feroza felt shocked, insecure and uprooted for some time but soon bounce back, she decided not to go back to home back but to live in America. In America, freedom is

considered as a birth right to every individual. The attraction of America lies not only in the material comfort it provides but also in the freedom it provides. Feroza tasted the fruit of freedom and did not wish to be bound by the traditional ways of her community; she wanted to live a free life of a bird.

Next stage to acculturation is Reverse culture shock, in which people get shocked with their native culture. Once an individual accepts the new culture whole heartily then he/she will be shocked by their own culture. People who lived abroad often find that the adjustment to returning home is more difficult than their adjustment to the foreign country. Values change as a result of living abroad with the integration into foreign culture lead the way to reverse culture shock. Changes in values, goals, priority and attitudes paved the way of thinking or feeling negativity towards their own culture.

Here Feroza got attachment towards the American culture and decided to settle there and she got shocked on interdependent attitude of Pakistani people. Though she was born and brought up in Parsi community and was taught to live dependent life, she finally in climax decided to lead the free life with total independence like a bird and expressed the satisfaction towards the freedom which could be provided easily by the American society. The novel describes how the immigrant characters, in spite of their sufferings accepted the new culture gradually and finally assimilated to the American culture in their lives. The novel is all about an immigrant's aspiration for economic live hood, social well being and intercultural understanding

Thus, when an individual migrates to any new land, he/she will undergo three stages on their immigration journey such as culture shock, acculturation and reverse culture shock.

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