

**Cultural Clash and Diasporic Identity in Bapsi Sidhwa's
*An American Brat***

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Abstract

This paper explores the themes of cultural conflict, diasporic identity, and gender politics in *An American Brat* by Bapsi Sidhwa. The novel presents the transformative journey of Feroza Ginwalla, a young Parsi woman sent from Pakistan to the United States, where she undergoes a profound cultural and psychological evolution. Through humour and social realism, Sidhwa examines the complexities of expatriation, identity crisis, and inter-community relationships within the Parsi diaspora. The study highlights how Westernization and patriarchal norms influence identity formation, particularly for women, and interrogates the rigid cultural structures that govern marriage and community belonging. The paper argues that the novel reflects the broader diasporic condition of negotiating between tradition and modernity, ultimately portraying identity as fluid and evolving.

Keywords: Diaspora, Cultural Conflict, Identity Crisis, Westernization, Parsi Community, Feminism, Expatriation

1. Introduction

Diasporic literature frequently addresses the tensions between homeland and host culture, focusing on displacement, identity, and belonging. *An American Brat* by Bapsi Sidhwa is a significant contribution to this body of work, offering a nuanced portrayal of the Parsi community and its struggles with cultural hybridity and

identity. Set against the socio-political backdrop of Pakistan during the late twentieth century, the novel narrates the story of Feroza Ginwalla, a young Parsi girl sent to the United States to escape the growing influence of religious conservatism. However, her journey becomes one of self-discovery, cultural negotiation, and identity transformation. Sidhwa uses Feroza's experiences to examine broader issues such as Westernisation, gender inequality, and inter-community tensions.

The Parsi community represents one of the most distinctive diasporic groups in South Asian history, characterised by multiple waves of migration, cultural adaptation, and resilience. Originally Zoroastrians from Persia (modern-day Iran), the Parsis fled their homeland between the 8th and 10th centuries to escape religious persecution following the Islamic conquest. Their migration to the western coast of India, particularly Gujarat, marks the beginning of their long diasporic journey, which has continued into the modern era. This initial displacement established a pattern of mobility and adaptation that has become central to Parsi identity. Upon settling in India, the Parsis gradually assimilated into the sociocultural fabric of the region while maintaining their distinct religious and cultural practices. Their willingness to adapt learning local languages, adopting certain customs, and engaging in trade and commerce enabled them to thrive economically and socially. At the same time, they retained a strong sense of communal identity rooted in Zoroastrian beliefs, rituals, and traditions. This balance between adaptation and preservation became a defining feature of the Parsi ethos.

The advent of British colonial rule in India marked a significant turning point in the history of the Parsi community. The Parsis were among the earliest groups to embrace Western education, English language, and modern professions. Their close association with the British administration provided them with access to economic opportunities and social mobility, leading to their emergence as a prominent and influential minority. However, this alignment with colonial power also contributed to a complex identity formation. While Westernization brought progress and modernization, it simultaneously created a cultural distance between the Parsis and other Indian communities. This process of Westernization resulted in what scholars often describe as "double alienation." On one hand, despite their adoption of British values and lifestyles, the Parsis were never fully accepted as equals by the colonial rulers. On the other hand, their strong identification with Western culture alienated them from the broader Indian society, especially during the rise of nationalist movements. Thus, the Parsis found themselves positioned in an ambiguous cultural

space, neither fully belonging to the colonizers nor entirely integrated with the colonized.

The Partition of India in 1947 further complicated the socio-political landscape for minority communities, including the Parsis. With the creation of India and Pakistan as separate nations, Parsis were dispersed across both countries, particularly in cities like Mumbai, Karachi, and Lahore. In Pakistan, where *An American Brat* is primarily set, the Parsis constituted a small but significant minority. However, the rise of religious nationalism and increasing Islamization, especially during the late twentieth century, created an atmosphere of uncertainty and marginalization for non-Muslim communities. In response to these changing conditions, many Parsis began to migrate once again, this time to Western countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. Unlike their initial migration from Persia, which was largely forced, this second wave of migration was often voluntary, driven by the pursuit of better economic opportunities, education, and a more liberal social environment. This phenomenon is frequently referred to as “double diaspora,” highlighting the community’s repeated experiences of displacement and resettlement.

This historical trajectory of migration and adaptation plays a crucial role in shaping the themes of *An American Brat*. The novel reflects the psychological and cultural implications of this diasporic condition, particularly in the context of identity formation. The Parsis’ longstanding engagement with Western culture makes their transition to the West both easier and more complex. While they may find certain aspects of Western life familiar, they also encounter new forms of alienation and cultural dislocation. Furthermore, the Parsi diaspora is marked by a deep sense of nostalgia and concern for cultural preservation. As a small and dwindling community, the Parsis have historically placed great emphasis on maintaining their religious and cultural identity. This concern is particularly evident in their strict rules regarding marriage and community membership. The prohibition of inter-community marriage, especially for women, reflects a fear of cultural dilution and eventual extinction. These anxieties are central to the conflicts depicted in *An American Brat*, where the protagonist’s choices challenge traditional norms and highlight the tension between individual freedom and communal responsibility. Another important aspect of the Parsi diasporic experience is the interplay between tradition and modernity. While the community has been at the forefront of modernization in many respects, it has also retained conservative attitudes in certain areas, particularly concerning religion and

gender roles. This paradox creates internal conflicts that are vividly portrayed in Sidhwa's narrative. Characters in the novel often grapple with competing values, trying to reconcile their inherited cultural norms with the realities of a rapidly changing world.

Expatriation and Cultural Transition

Expatriation in *An American Brat* is portrayed as a complex, multi-layered process involving psychological, cultural, and emotional transformation. Rather than presenting migration as a simple geographical movement, Bapsi Sidhwa conceptualizes expatriation as a profound transition from familiarity to unfamiliarity, from cultural certainty to ambiguity, and from collective identity to individual self-awareness. The protagonist, Feroza Ginwalla, embodies this transition. Raised in Lahore within a conservative Parsi family, she is initially shaped by a rigid socio-cultural environment influenced by both patriarchal values and the increasing Islamization of Pakistan during the late 1970s. Her parents' decision to send her to the United States is motivated by a desire to protect her from what they perceive as regressive religious influences. Ironically, this attempt to preserve her cultural identity becomes the very catalyst for its transformation.

Feroza's initial encounter with America is marked by a profound sense of dislocation and culture shock. Her arrival at an American airport introduces her to an unfamiliar world characterized by bureaucratic scrutiny, linguistic barriers, and social alienation. The interrogation by immigration officials, combined with her confusion over procedural norms, symbolizes the vulnerability of the expatriate subject in an alien environment. This moment serves as her initiation into the realities of diasporic life, where identity is immediately questioned and often reduced to nationality and ethnicity. As she navigates the new environment, Feroza experiences a series of contrasting impressions. On one hand, she is fascinated by the modernity, efficiency, and material abundance of American society the bright lights, orderly systems, and advanced infrastructure. On the other hand, she encounters suspicion, racial prejudice, and moments of personal insecurity. This duality reflects the ambivalent nature of expatriation, where attraction and alienation coexist.

The process of cultural transition becomes more evident in Feroza's everyday experiences. Her interactions with people from diverse cultural backgrounds expose her to new social norms and values. Living with her uncle Manek, who acts as a cultural mediator, she begins to understand the expectations and behavioural codes

of American society. His guidance helps her adapt to practical aspects of life, such as communication styles, social etiquette, and personal independence. However, this adaptation is not merely external; it gradually influences her internal perceptions and attitudes. A significant aspect of Feroza's transformation is her exposure to individualism, a core value of Western culture. In contrast to the collective and family-oriented structure of her upbringing, American society emphasizes personal freedom, privacy, and self-expression. This shift allows Feroza to explore her own identity beyond the constraints imposed by her community. She begins to make independent choices regarding her appearance, lifestyle, and relationships, signaling a move towards self-actualization.

However, this newfound freedom is accompanied by confusion and moral conflict. Feroza often finds herself caught between the values she has internalized in Pakistan and the new norms she encounters in America. For instance, her initial discomfort with open social interactions, gender relations, and public behaviour gradually gives way to acceptance and participation. Yet, this process is neither smooth nor complete; it involves moments of guilt, hesitation, and self-reflection. The role of peer influence is crucial in accelerating Feroza's cultural transition. Her interactions with American friends, particularly her roommate Jo, introduce her to aspects of Western lifestyle that challenge her traditional sensibilities. Through these relationships, she learns to navigate social situations, adopt new habits, and reinterpret her understanding of gender roles and sexuality. This phase marks a significant departure from her earlier conservative identity, highlighting the transformative power of cultural exposure.

At the same time, the novel does not idealize the Western experience. Feroza's encounters with the darker aspects of American society such as loneliness, moral ambiguity, and instances of harassment serve as a reminder that expatriation is not a linear progression towards liberation. Instead, it is a complex negotiation involving both empowerment and vulnerability. Her experiences in unfamiliar spaces, including moments of fear and isolation, underscore the psychological challenges faced by migrants, particularly women. The theme of expatriation is further complicated by issues of race and otherness. In America, Feroza is no longer part of a privileged minority as she was in Pakistan; instead, she becomes a "non-white" outsider. This shift in social positioning forces her to confront a new dimension of identity, one that is shaped by racial and cultural difference. Her realization of being perceived as "other" adds another layer to her evolving self-awareness.

Despite these challenges, expatriation ultimately enables Feroza to achieve a degree of personal growth and independence. Her journey reflects a movement from innocence to experience, from dependence to autonomy. She develops the confidence to question traditional norms and assert her individuality, even when it leads to conflict with her family and community. Importantly, the novel presents expatriation not as a complete rupture from the past but as a process of negotiation and synthesis. While Feroza adopts many aspects of Western culture, she does not entirely abandon her Parsi identity. Instead, she carries it with her as part of her cultural consciousness, illustrating the idea that diasporic identity is not fixed but fluid and hybrid.

In this sense, expatriation in *An American Brat* can be understood as a transformative journey that reshapes identity through continuous interaction with different cultural forces. It highlights the tensions between tradition and modernity, belonging and alienation, and conformity and individuality. Through Feroza's experiences, Bapsi Sidhwa offers a nuanced portrayal of the diasporic condition, emphasizing both its challenges and its potential for self-discovery. Ultimately, the novel suggests that cultural transition is not merely about adaptation to a new environment but about redefining one's sense of self. It is through this process that the expatriate subject navigates the complexities of identity, forging a space that accommodates both past and present, heritage and change.

Identity Crisis and Transformation

One of the most significant themes in the novel is the identity crisis experienced by diasporic individuals. Feroza's transformation from a conservative, tradition-bound girl to a confident and independent woman illustrates the profound impact of cultural exposure. In Pakistan, Feroza is shaped by a patriarchal and conservative environment. However, her experiences in America challenge these constraints, allowing her to explore new ways of thinking and living. She adopts Western clothing, social practices, and attitudes, gradually distancing herself from her original identity. This transformation, however, is not without conflict. Feroza finds herself caught between two cultures, unable to fully belong to either. This duality reflects the broader diasporic condition, where identity is fragmented and constantly negotiated.

Gender and Patriarchy

Sidhwa's novel offers a critical examination of gender roles within the Parsi community. The patriarchal structure of the society imposes strict limitations on

women, particularly in matters of marriage and personal autonomy. While men are allowed to marry outside the community, women are expected to adhere to rigid norms that prioritize cultural preservation over individual choice. Feroza's desire to marry a non-Parsi man challenges these norms, exposing the gender bias inherent in the community's traditions. Through characters such as Zareen and Feroza, Sidhwa highlights the struggles faced by women in negotiating personal freedom within restrictive cultural frameworks. The novel thus serves as a critique of patriarchal values and advocates for greater gender equality.

Inter-Community Marriage and Cultural Anxiety

Inter-community marriage is a central conflict in *An American Brat*. Feroza's relationship with David Press, an American Jew, becomes a focal point for exploring the tensions between individual desire and communal expectations. The strong opposition from Feroza's family reflects the Parsi community's anxiety about cultural survival. As a small minority, the Parsis fear that intermarriage will lead to the erosion of their identity and traditions. This fear is particularly pronounced in the case of women, whose marriages are seen as crucial to maintaining cultural continuity. Sidhwa presents this conflict with nuance, acknowledging both the importance of cultural preservation and the need for individual freedom. The novel ultimately questions the rigidity of such norms in an increasingly globalized world.

Cultural Hybridity and Adaptation

The novel presents a complex interplay of cultures, including Parsi, Islamic, and Western influences. This cultural hybridity is reflected in Feroza's experiences, as she navigates different social and cultural environments. Rather than completely abandoning her heritage, Feroza integrates elements of both cultures, creating a hybrid identity. This process of adaptation illustrates the dynamic nature of diasporic identity, which is shaped by continuous interaction with diverse cultural contexts. Sidhwa suggests that such hybridity is not a loss of identity but a means of survival and growth in a multicultural world.

Conclusion

An American Brat offers a compelling exploration of cultural conflict, diasporic identity, and gender dynamics. Bapsi Sidhwa effectively captures the complexities of migration and the challenges of negotiating identity in a globalized world. Through Feroza's journey, the novel illustrates the transformative power of cultural exposure and the tensions it creates. While expatriation provides

opportunities for growth and self-realization, it also leads to alienation and identity fragmentation. Ultimately, the novel advocates for a balance between tradition and modernity, suggesting that identity is not fixed but continuously evolving. It calls for greater openness and flexibility within cultural and religious frameworks, particularly in relation to gender and inter-community relationships.

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