



Research Paper

Tension between Desire for Independence and Cultural Constraints in Bapsi Sidhwa's "An American Brat"

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ABSTRACT:

The present research paper examines the impact of cultural conflict and displacement on women's identities in Bapsi Sidhwa's novel "An American Brat." It analyses the protagonist, Feroza's, journey as an immigrant woman who struggles to balance her Pakistani cultural identity with her new American identity. The paper uses literary analysis to explore how Feroza's experiences with displacement shape her identity and relationships with others. The paper argues that Sidhwa's novel highlights the complexities of navigating cultural identities and provides insight into the experiences of immigrant women. This research paper also explores the tension between the desire for independence and cultural constraints depicted in Bapsi Sidhwa's novel, "An American Brat." Through an analysis of the protagonist's experiences, this paper examines the complex interplay between personal aspirations for freedom and the cultural constraints that restrict individual agency.

KEYWORDS: Bapsi Sidhwa, An American Brat, Cultural Conflict, Displacement, Women's Identities, Immigrant Women, Desire for Independence, Cultural Constraints.

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I. Introduction:

Bapsi Sidhwa is a Pakistani-American novelist and writer, born on August 11, 1938, in Karachi, British India (now Pakistan). She is best known for her novels which explore themes such as gender, sexuality, politics, and culture in the Indian subcontinent. Sidhwa's most famous work, "Ice Candy Man" (1988), which was later adapted into the movie "Earth" by Deepa Mehta, depicts the events leading up to the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 through the eyes of a young Parsi girl. Sidhwa's other notable works include "The Crow Eaters" (1978), "An American Brat" (1993), and "Water: A Novel" (2006), which was also adapted into a movie by Deepa Mehta. Sidhwa has received numerous awards for her contributions to literature, including the Sitara-i-Imtiaz, the highest literary award given by the Pakistani government, and the Padma Shri, one of India's highest civilian awards. Sidhwa currently resides in the United States, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Houston.

Bapsi Sidhwa's "An American Brat" is a novel that explores the cultural conflict and displacement experienced by Pakistani immigrants in the United States. The novel focuses on Feroza, a young Pakistani woman who is sent to the United States to study, and her experiences navigating the complexities of life in a foreign culture. The protagonist, Feroza, is a Pakistani woman who moves to the United States to attend college. Throughout the novel, Feroza struggles to balance her Pakistani cultural identity with her new American identity, which leads to conflicts with her family and friends. This research paper analyzes how Feroza's experiences with displacement shape her identity and relationships with others. This research paper aims to analyze the impact of displacement on women's identities, specifically through the character of Feroza.

The paper employs a feminist postcolonial framework to examine the ways in which displacement shape Feroza's sense of self and her relationships with others. The paper argues that Feroza's identity is shaped by her experiences of displacement, her negotiations of cultural expectations, and her resistance to patriarchal structures. The paper also explores how Feroza's experiences reflect broader themes of displacement in the Pakistani diaspora.

The clash between Feroza's Pakistani heritage and the American society:

Throughout the novel, Sidhwa portrays the clash between Feroza's Pakistani heritage and the American society she finds herself in. This clash creates a sense of displacement and cultural conflict for Feroza, which greatly influences her identity. Here are some suitable quotations and their explanations that highlight the impact of cultural conflict and displacement on women's identities in "An American Brat": "The entire milieu had changed. The language, the manner of dress, the style of thought; all of it was in flux. I found myself groping for my own identity" (Page 20). This quote reflects Feroza's initial struggle with adapting to the American culture. The sudden change in her environment leaves her feeling disoriented and disconnected from her own identity. It highlights the impact of cultural conflict and displacement on her sense of self.

Cultural Conflicts and Identity Crisis:

One of the central themes in the novel is the clash between traditional Pakistani values and the Western lifestyle. Feroza, a young Parsi girl, faces a constant struggle to reconcile these conflicting identities. She finds herself torn between her Pakistani heritage and the American culture she encounters in the United States.

In Chapter 3, Feroza's father expresses his concern over the American influence on his daughter's identity: "She's picked up all kinds of wrong ideas there, become completely Westernized" (p. 40). This quote highlights the anxiety Feroza's father feels about her adopting Western values, which he perceives as a threat to her Pakistani identity.

Displacement and Loss of Cultural Roots:

When Feroza's family moves to the United States, they face the challenges of adapting to a new environment and leaving their cultural roots behind. This displacement contributes to a sense of loss and disorientation, particularly for Feroza and her mother.

In Chapter 5, Feroza's mother expresses her longing for Pakistan: "I feel as though I've lost my home, my family, my past, my moorings" (p. 62). This poignant quote reveals the emotional impact of displacement on a woman's sense of self. Feroza's mother feels uprooted and disconnected from her cultural and personal history, resulting in a profound identity crisis.

Women Caught Between Traditional and Modern Roles:

The novel also explores the struggles faced by women as they navigate traditional gender roles and the desire for independence. Feroza finds herself torn between societal expectations and her own aspirations, leading to a conflict within her identity.

In Chapter 7, Feroza reflects on the expectations placed upon her: "I am expected to be submissive and submissive I shall be, but there is a storm inside me" (p. 91). This quote illustrates the internal turmoil Feroza experiences as she tries to conform to societal norms while grappling with her own desires and ambitions. It exemplifies the conflict between the traditional roles imposed on women and their yearning for autonomy.

Cultural Assimilation and Loss of Authenticity:

As Feroza spends more time in the United States, she finds herself assimilating into the American culture, leading to a dilution of her Pakistani identity. This process of assimilation further complicates her sense of self.

In Chapter 10, Feroza reflects on her changing identity: "I am becoming Americanized, this place is making me different" (p. 134). This quote reveals Feroza's awareness of her cultural transformation and the anxiety she feels about losing her authentic self. It emphasizes the impact of cultural displacement on a woman's identity and the challenges of preserving one's heritage in a foreign environment.

Feroza's identity is through her relationship with her mother:

One of the most significant ways in which cultural conflict impacts Feroza's identity is through her relationship with her mother. In Pakistan, Feroza's mother is a traditional, conservative woman who emphasizes the importance of obedience and conformity. However, when the family moves to the US, Feroza's mother begins to feel isolated and out of place, which leads her to become more open-minded and independent. This change in her mother's personality confuses and unsettles Feroza, as she struggles to reconcile her mother's new behavior with the woman she knew in Pakistan. As Feroza says: "Mother had changed so much. It was as if she had come alive in America. She was happy, and yet, in a way, distant. She was more animated and her voice was louder, yet it was as if she didn't hear me." (p. 70) Here this quote highlights the conflict between Feroza's expectations of her mother and the reality of her mother's changing identity. Feroza feels disconnected from her mother because she no longer knows how to relate to her.

Experiences of racism and discrimination:

Another way in which cultural conflict affects Feroza's identity is through her experiences of racism and discrimination in the US. Feroza's family is one of the few Pakistani families in their community, and they face constant prejudice and hostility from their neighbors. Feroza struggles to understand why people treat her differently based on her skin color and her cultural background, and she feels a deep sense of isolation and alienation. As Feroza says: "I didn't know why they hated me. I hadn't done anything to them. It was just because I was different." (p. 119) This quote illustrates the way in which racism and discrimination can impact a person's sense of self-worth and belonging. Feroza's experiences in the US make her acutely aware of her differences from those around her and make her feel like an outsider.

Loss of Feroza's connection to her Pakistani heritage:

The ways in which displacement affect Feroza's identity is through the loss of her connection to her Pakistani heritage. As Feroza becomes more assimilated into American culture, she feels a growing sense of detachment from her Pakistani roots. For example, when Feroza returns to Pakistan after several years in the United States, she realizes that she no longer feels at home there: "I found I was an alien in my own country, with its strange smells and sounds" (p. 171). This sense of alienation reflects the disconnection that Feroza feels from her cultural heritage.

American standards of beauty and femininity:

Displacement affect Feroza's identity is through the pressure she feels to conform to American standards of beauty and femininity. In the United States, Feroza is confronted with a culture that values thinness and conformity, which clashes with the more traditional values of her Pakistani upbringing. As a result, Feroza struggles with body image issues and feelings of inadequacy: "I was too fat, too short, too dark, too ethnic" (1982, p. 58). This pressure to conform to American beauty standards represents a form of cultural conflict that is specific to women's experiences.

The tension between Pakistani heritage and American upbringing:

Cultural conflict affects Feroza's identity is through the tension between her Pakistani heritage and her American upbringing. Feroza struggles to reconcile these two identities, as she feels torn between the two cultures. As Feroza's father explains to her, "You are caught between two worlds. In neither do you fit" (p. 66). This conflict is evident throughout the novel, as Feroza grapples with the expectations of her family and community, as well as those of her American peers.

Feroza's identity as a woman and Feroza's physical appearance:

Feroza's identity as a woman is also impacted by the cultural conflict she faces. In the novel, Sidhwa highlights the different expectations placed on women in Pakistani and American cultures. For example, when Feroza's mother tells her that she must get married and have children, Feroza is frustrated by these expectations, as she wants to pursue her own dreams and ambitions. She tells her mother, "I want to make something of myself. I want to do something, be somebody. I don't want to just be a wife and mother" (p. 104). This tension between traditional gender roles and Feroza's desire for independence highlights the impact of cultural conflict on women's identities.

Displacement also plays a significant role in shaping Feroza's identity. When she moves to the United States, she feels isolated and disconnected from her Pakistani roots. She struggles to find a sense of belonging, as she is neither fully American nor fully Pakistani. As Feroza reflects, "I was neither here nor there. I didn't belong anywhere" (p. 23). This sense of displacement is further exacerbated by the racism and prejudice she faces in the United States, as she is often discriminated against for her ethnicity and religion.

Feroza's physical appearance becomes a source of conflict for her. The disparity between her brown skin and the Western clothing she wears represents the clash between her Pakistani heritage and the American culture she has adopted. It emphasizes the tension between Feroza's cultural identity and her attempts to assimilate. "Sometimes, after my last class, I would find myself standing in front of the mirror, unable to recognize the person staring back at me. She looked strange, her brown skin blotchy and incongruous with her blue jeans and sweatshirt" (Page 43).

Sense of self-worth and confidence:

Feroza's displacement also impacts her sense of self-worth and confidence. She feels inferior to her American peers, who she sees as more confident and self-assured. As Feroza explains, "The American girls were different. They didn't feel the need to explain themselves. They were who they were and that was that" (p. 41). This comparison highlights the impact of displacement on Feroza's self-esteem and self-perception.

The tension between desire for independence:

Displacement also affect Feroza's identity through the tension between her desire for independence and her cultural obligations to her family. Feroza's parents expect her to conform to traditional gender roles, such as getting married and having children, while Feroza herself desires more autonomy and freedom: "I wanted independence, the right to make my own choices" (p. 219). This tension between tradition and independence reflects the conflict that many young women experience as they navigate the competing expectations of their cultural and personal identities.

Finally, displacement plays a significant role in shaping Feroza's identity throughout the novel. When her family moves to the US, Feroza is forced to leave behind everything she knows and loves in Pakistan, including her extended family, her home, and her culture. As a result, she feels a profound sense of loss and grief. Feroza struggles to find a sense of belonging in the US, as she longs for the familiarity and comfort of her home country. As Feroza says: "I wanted to go back to Pakistan, to the smell of incense and jasmine, the taste of sweet mangoes, the sound of the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer. But I couldn't. I was trapped in America." (p. 163) This quote highlights the sense of displacement and dislocation that Feroza experiences as a result of her move to the US. She feels like she is caught between two worlds and can't fully embrace either one.

II. Conclusion:

Bapsi Sidhwa's "An American Brat" highlights the impact of displacement on women's identities, particularly as it relates to the loss of connection to one's cultural heritage, pressure to conform to beauty standards, and tension between tradition and independence. The novel provides a nuanced exploration of these themes through the experiences of Feroza Ginwalla. Bapsi Sidhwa's novel "An American Brat" also explores the complex tension between the desire for independence and the cultural constraints faced by its protagonist. Through the experiences of Feroza, a young Pakistani girl raised in the United States, Sidhwa delves into the clash between individual aspirations and societal expectations.

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