

BAPSI SIDHWA'S AN AMERICAN BRAT: AN INTER CULTURAL THEME

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ABSTRACT

An American brat deals with the inter-cultural theme and has assumed a vital significance for many a post-colonial novelist. Bapsi Sidhwa is the product of the conflicts and reconciliations of the East and the West. Speaking of the east-west encounter Meenakshi Mukherji observes:

In some novels, the west appears as a
character, in some others as an attitude
or a set of values.

In an American Brat, the conflict between the two cultures is perceptible not only on the social plane but also on the 'personal level' leading to a quest for identity.

KEYWORDS: An American Brat-The Internal Cultural Theme, Post-colonial Novelist. Bapsi Sidhwa

INTRODUCTION

Bapsi Sidhwa evinces keen interest in the interaction of the two sets of values that exist side by side and often coalesce. The Zoroastrian mode of life of Feroza, the central consciousness, clashes with the modern American way of life in which the emphasis is on material prosperity. The resultant friction compels her to make a moral choice. This fate is shared by many an expatriate today.

In Feroza, there is a conscious shift from conservative interest to cosmopolitan attitude and from religious exclusiveness to universalism. This progression in the consciousness of Feroza becomes central to the narrative.

Feroza's initial conservatism is the outcome of the rapidly altering socio political ambience in Pakistan. Zareen, mother of Feroza is a progressive Zoroastrian who is apprehensive that her daughter is becoming more and more backward everyday! Cyrus, her husband, on the other hand, prefers that Feroza should. "Stay narrow-minded". His conservatism is in sharp contrast to his wife's liberalism. The concern voiced by her over Feroza's fits of fury fails to evoke a sympathetic response in him. However he accepts her suggestion of a "superficial jaunt" for Feroza in America.

Meenakshi Mukherjee: 'the twice born fiction' PP: 66-67

Initially, Zareen's complacency stems from her confidence in Feroza's upbringing. Feroza is stubborn with "a streak of pride bordering on arrogance". So Zareen leaves the disciplining of Feroza to Khutlibai, her mother. Khutlibai, summons up 'Oceanic reserves of patience' and her 'extravagant care, and her uncle's sinister ingenuity transformed her into a wise and at least overtly malleable girl.

The cuddled atmosphere brings about a tangible change in Feroza. Zareen is optimistic that the mind broadening and character building horizons abroad would sharpen her daughter's unrefined conservative sensibilities.

Feroza, like most modern Parsees, is not deeply religious. Speaking of Feroza's relationship with Zoroastrianism, the religion of the Parsees, Bapsi Sidhwa writes thus:

Like most Parsees who know very little
 About their religion, Feroza had a
 Comfortable relationship with the
 Faith she was brought into, she
 Accepted it as she did the color
 of her eyes or the length of her limbs.

The detached stance of Bapsi Sidhwa and some of her critical comments on the ways of the Zoroastrian community give a vivid glimpse of the modern Parsi life. Feroza resolves to have humta(good thoughts), Hukhta(good words) hvarshata(good deeds) that would advance His divine plan. Her experience at the fire temple is significant. She feels the spiritual power of the fire reach out from its divine depths to encompass her with its pure energy. She feels herself being suffused with Ahura Mazda's presence as the lucid flame of the holy vision illumines her mind. She prays thus:

Come to my help, O Ahura mazda!
 Give me victory, power and the
 Bapsi Sidhwa, 'An American Brat', P.40
 Ibid P.42
 Ibid: p.52
 Joy of life.

Fear of the unknown grips Feroza as she journeys to the new world. She becomes conscious of the gravitational pull of the land she was leaving behind. The novelist describes her state of mind in vivid terms:

Her sense of self, enlarged by osmosis
 Of identity with her community and
 With her group of School friends,
 Stayed with her like a permanence-
 Like the support that ocean basins
 Provide the wind and the moon-generated
 Vagaries of its waters.

Her self-conscious which is a virtue in Pakistan bars her from viewing the American milieu in the realistic perspective. She sheds her in-built fears and plunges into the maelstrom of American life with gusto. The 'confidence building new manifestation' of Manek, her uncle and her spirited response to the initial challenges in America give a new direction to her life.

Discussing the major trends in post-colonial Literatures, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin write:

A major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being, the concern with the development of recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place.

ASHCROFT, GRIFFITHS AND TIFFIN, 'THE EMPIRE WRITES BACK, P.P.8-9.

Feroza's valid and active sense of self is eroded by dislocation which results from migration. The sudden swing from the stifling milieu of Lahore to the exhilarating surreal world of New York disorients her.

Manek assumes the role of a guide to his niece as he realizes that she has become a 'desirable and passionate woman'. In his new role as a guide to Feroza, he is ruthless. His catechism on the value of time is the effect of the spell cast by America. He absorbs the American notion that time is the single most precious commodity besides money. Pakistan is backward because its people 'squander time' as if they were 'millionaires in eternity'. His inner landscape which is typically Pakistani before arriving in America becomes westernized as he attunes his responses to the new benevolent milieu. His transformed mode of life and his scathing criticism of Pakistani life reveal the ravages of time to Feroza.

Gradually a perceptible change comes over Feroza. She begins to absorb the 'sleazy atmosphere', rife with titillation and novelty, through all her excited and amplified senses. Her spirit of adventure is heightened by voyeuristic sense of guilt. She gains much knowledge which the conventional morality denies her in Pakistan. What she beholds in the new world represents a rich slice of life and experience she had come to explore writes Novy Kapadia:

Through Feroza's experiences, Bapsi Sidhwa also shows the expatriate's assimilation to the way of life of the new world.

REFERENCES

1. **Novy Kapadia:** 'Expatriate Experience and Theme of Marriage in 'An American Brat'', The Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa, Ed. R.K.Dhawan and Novy Kapadia. P.191

