

# Onward and Forward – Encapsulating the Insightful Evolution of Bapsi Sidhwa’s Feroza

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## Abstract

South Asian English writing/ (Writings from the Partition, especially those tethered to the Indian subcontinent have) has been depicting the sociopolitical and cultural aspects of living in India. *An American Brat* by Bapsi Sidhwa is a text that circles around the journey and eventual growth of Feroza, the protagonist who is a Parsee girl from Pakistan. One could study the journey of Feroza from Lahore to America for the purpose of narrowing the focus on the struggles of women with respect to asserting themselves as individuals or members of a community.

This paper deals with the living conditions, cultural aspects, religious decrees and biases and challenges faced by women in particular. One can see her transformation from a young conservative girl that criticizes her mom’s dressing to a grown-up woman that makes her own choices – solid and well-thought-out decisions. She is sent to her uncle in the United States of America for a 3-month holiday, but ends up continuing her studies there. From a demure conservative girl, she matures into an independent social butterfly, a young woman who is more westernised than her mother ever wants. The novel and the paper in turn revolve around her troubles, challenges and experiences that she goes through thereafter, and the learnings she gathers from them.

**Keywords:** women, religion, community, culture, assertion, transformation.

## Introduction

South Asian English writing/ (Writings from the Indian subcontinent have) has been holding a mirror to the geopolitical, social and cultural facets of life in the subcontinent. Bapsi Sidhwa’s *An American Brat* accomplishes the feat of giving a rounded look at living in the fringes of concepts, community and country. It takes up a sturdy journey of growth as one sees the transformation and maturity of the female lead, Feroza, who becomes a world citizen by the end of the novel. The concept of globalization has increased opportunities and social choices for women. Despite the technical advancement making the world a global village, women are dealt an unfair deal. They are challenged by discrimination and inequality. Violence, abuse and unequal treatment at home, at work and in their communities have become a part of a majority of women’s life. They have less opportunities to learn, earn and to lead a peaceful or respectful life in many communities and countries.

In Indian English literature, women characters are typically given undesirable traits such as deception, egocentricity, enticement and seduction. As literature is a reflection of society, women were depicted as controlled, contained, and exploited. Women were treated as objects of possession, forces deadly to men, sly, submissive, dishonorable and often less honorable than men. But in the last few decades, there has

been an enormous shift in the role of women, representation of women and treatment of women. There are many women writers who reflected such noticeable changes in the treatment of women in their works such as Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Shashi Deshpande, Bapsi Sidhwa, etc. For the purpose of this paper, *An American Brat* by Bapsi Sidhwa is chosen. The methodology taken up is textual analysis. Lines from the text are picked up and used to analyse particular situations or perspectives. A short introduction to the author and text precedes the observations. A bibliography follows the analysis and validation through quotes from the text or additional comments.

Bapsi Sidhwa, is a well-received author who received the South-Asian Excellence Award for literature and brilliance in literature at the Zoroastrian Congress in Chicago. She was born on 11<sup>th</sup> August, 1938 to Zoroastrian parents in Karachi, which was in British India and went on to move to Lahore along with her family. Bapsi Sidhwa is a substantial figure on the world literature scene. Themes in her novels range from traditional to current issues and shift from a pre-independent social passage to partition.

Bapsi Sidhwa's novels deal with the Parsee characters in various colours and moods, their culture, their rites, beliefs and traditions. Bapsi Sidhwa creates her characters with love and fondness, and tries to develop them fully throughout the story. There are all sorts of characters – round, flat, evolving, static, black, white, grey, lovable, hateful, impressive, passive, memorable and insignificant. The triple identity of Sidhwa a Pakistani, Parsee and a woman – gives her an advantage to exploit her threefold sensibilities to create a fantastic gallery of variety of characters.

Her novels are set in India that is pre-independent or partition, the notion of change is a regular backdrop in her works. *An American Brat* came out with an interesting range of characters in 1993.

*An American Brat* is an exceptional novel . . . funny and memorable (Los Angeles Times, 1993)

*An American Brat* explores Parsee/ Pakistani diaspora. The story runs through Lahore, Pakistan and America. Sidhwa paints a thorough picture of rites, customs, beliefs, rituals, superstitions, myths, religious ceremonies, folklores and various aspects of Parsees' life through this novel. *An American Brat* narrates the story of Feroza, a Parsee girl, who is sent to the US by her parents for a vacation of three-month to get rid of her conventional thinking. It is a novel of cultural shocks, adapting, acclimatization and compromises necessary for a young Parsee woman to settle down in America. It portrays the journey of a nervous and indulged young Pakistani Parsee girl from innocence to experience.

*An American Brat* is the journey of Feroza, a young Parsee girl, who comes of age by way of her adventures in America. At the outset of the novel itself we find that Feroza is to be sent to the United States of America by her parents Zareen and Cyrus Ginwala, Cyrus is the owner of a sports goods store.

The story is set in 1978 and takes place in Lahore. Pakistan was in General Zia's fundamentalist rule while Bhutto is in prison. Zareen is a great follower of Bhutto. And understands that her daughter Feroza is growing up conservative when Feroza criticizes her mother's dressing style. Zareen convinces her husband and family to send Feroza to the United States of America for a 3-month holiday for maturity, growth and to get rid of the conservative mind-set. Manek, Feroza's uncle, convinces her to pursue a course in hotel management at a junior college in Idaho. Manek gets Americanized and changes his name to Mike. At the same time, Manek never forgets his tradition and has enough respect for his tradition that makes him come back to Islamic Republic of Pakistan to tie the knot to a Parsee girl. In contrast, Feroza goes through a phase in advance when she decides to marry an American Jew, Mr. David Press. Knowing this fact, Zareen rushes to America to change her daughter's mind. She is very mindful of her marginal status and is obsessed with the fact that she is a Parsee, one among 1,20,000 in the world. She sees that Feroza's

marriage to a non-Parsee community will mean spiritual refugee for her daughter as the Parsees prohibit inter-community marriages, considering it as an offense against nature. Despite having a moderately open-minded outlook, the associates of this community, according to survey and historical records – mainly doctors, engineers and paid professionals, are faithful isolationists when it comes to the matters of faith and marriage. A Parsee man can marry a non-Parsee woman, but this invokes scorn from the community. On the other hand, a Parsee woman marrying a non-Parsee man, invokes ire and would result in her to being ex-communicated from the faith. By making Feroza fall in love with a non-Parsee, Bapsi Sidhwa intends to question Parsee's law in favour of men and against women. However, Feroza misses her sweetheart, all this creates an impression that Feroza is strong-minded more than ever before to get married to a non-Parsee.

In general, writers' characterization of women in their writings focuses on the sufferings, sexual trauma and painful experiences of women. In contrast to the majority of these writers Sidhwa's novels provide the image of the confident women in a male dominated society. Transformation of the protagonist Feroza is well-developed throughout the novel, Sidhwa's first three books are set in the Indian subcontinent, her fourth novel is set partially in Pakistan and in the USA. The tie is in the late seventies. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto is in prison and Islamic secularism is increasing in Pakistan. The protagonist of the novel, Feroza, cautiously brought-up in the small but flourishing Parsee community in Lahore is to be sent to America to be protected from being more inclined by Islamic government and believing that travel will broaden her outlook.

“Travel will broaden her outlook; get this puritanical rubbish out of her head” (AAB,14).

However, the proposal to send Feroza off to the United States of America is quite risky, daring, and over-confident, Cyrus consents to it because he recalls how nervously Feroza had acted with a young boy in their drawing-hall a week before. Feroza's joy knows no limits as the procedures for her tour to the USA are finalized. How eager and excited she is to go to America!

Feroza slipped under her quilt fully dressed, her eyes wide open, her mind throbbing with elation. She was going to America! She found it difficult to believe. She repeated to herself, “I'm going to America, I'm going to America! Until her doubts slowly ebbed and her certainty, too, caught the rhythm of her happiness.

To the land of glossy magazines, of “Be witched” and “Star Trek”. (AAB,27)

Throughout her journey, Feroza behaves as instructed by the elders, but as soon as she reaches America, she is a changed person. As the plane lands at Kennedy Airport, Feroza is glorious and radiant. She is amazed by the orderly traffic of rushing people, the bright lights and warmed air, the astonishing hygiene and sheen of floors and furnishing, the audacious enormity of the glass and steel enclosed spaces.

*An American Brat* discusses in detail the growing sense of restlessness that the Parsee community experiences in Pakistan. Sidhwa confers of how there is a general lineage into totalitarianism in the name of faith and how even the non-Islamic communities like Parsees were affected by the growing secularism. Zareen protests about her daughter's attitude being affected by the laws. She utters,

She objected to my sleeveless sari blouse! Really this narrow-minded attitude touted by General Zia.... I told her: “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? (AAB,10).

This then is a remark on the worsening of communal customs that has taken place in Pakistan since independence, in the name of faith. Women are most affected by the commands of narrow religious authorizations, which spread gender discrimination. When she finds Jo, her American roommate, her dressing, her etiquette and the way she makes company with boys she feels that she is culturally displaced. However, with the impact of her American roommate, Jo, Feroza entirely adopts an American lifestyle. She behaves, talks and dresses like an American girl. The nervous and traditional Feroza converts into a self-assured and aggressive girl. She learns to dance, drive, drink, dance and use the American dialect: she flirts with an Indian student, Shashi, at the University of Denver. Later, she is in love with a handsome young American Jew David Press.

Feroza, the leading role of the story voyages through three cultures – her own community’s Parsee culture, her country Pakistan’s Islamic culture and western culture of the United States of America. It is the story of the sixteen- year-old Feroza’s predicament of “who I was and what I have become.”

Feroza starts to adapt to the freedom of thought and soul, and develops assertiveness while she stays in the United States, which is an unknown and unfamiliar experience to her innocent Pakistani conservative background. Feroza even goes for a holiday with Jo’s family at Boulder and tries to broaden her outlook. Poignantly, Feroza outgrows her primary advisors, uncle Manek and friend Jo. Manek relishes the company of open-minded women but when it comes to tying the knot, he comes back to Lahore and expresses consent to an arranged marriage. He selects an obedient girl, Aban, to whom separation is an ‘inauspicious word’. Such a decision replicates the Parsee spirit and an inquisitive contradictory approach of the Parsee (and in general) male towards females. Westernised education for Parsee women is longed for, yet feminine behaviour and traits are expected from these conscious/ aware women and any form of self-assertion is decried.

The title *An American Brat* is justified and sounds credible after reading the whole story of Feroza’s coming of age. The novel is a kind of Bildungsroman tracing the life of a timid young pampered Pakistani Parsee girl whose sojourn from innocence to experience is captured impressively. This experience does not come for free, rather Feroza has to pay a heavy price to get it. As soon as she reaches America, she sets her spirit free and forgets that this visit has been rather forced on her by her parents, particularly her mother Zareen. Her mind, body and soul start absorbing America through every pore and the reader finds that the much hyped ‘cultural displacement’ is very mild and short-lived in Feroza. She is surprised at the typical American ideas, concepts and practices, but her eagerness to learn and grow makes her comply and adapt to her new surroundings though her stay is temporary. Moreover, she does it rather swiftly and efficiently. In no time, Feroza’s words and actions – her acceptance of the first world culture, result in her maturity, as if her third-world mentality disappeared without a trace.

Feroza’s character comes to a full circle towards the end of the novel. She is a mature person with a pragmatic and clear thought process. She has learnt from America to move forward and keep choices open, she decides that

There would be no going back for her, but she could go back at will. (AAB, 317)

She will carry her religion in her heart and experience it inwardly. Feroza reflects

May be one day she'd soar to that self-contained place from which there was no falling, if there was such a place. (AAB,317)

The open ending of the novel was a conscious choice of Sidhwa, this gives a sense of profundity to Feroza's role. Her beliefs in the climax novel seem endless and extend beyond the cover of the book.

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