
Quest for Identity in Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*: A Postcolonial Perspective

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Abstract

Diasporic dislocation due to transcending boundaries and its consequences is a much-focused issue in postcolonial literature. All those writers who are living in a foreign culture have faced this issue. Therefore, the clash between the indigenous and the foreign cultures splits their personalities and they search for their identity. The present research is intended to explore the implicit optimism in diasporic dislocation and its consequences in Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat* (2012). This is a qualitative research using an eclectic approach, which is the combination of Edward Sarian and Homi K Bhabha frameworks. The results show that identity crisis is a pertinent concept in diasporic literature and the protagonist in the novel under discussion goes certain transformations. In this process, the heroin of the novel faces a dislocation and a cultural crisis in terms of her cultural identity. She could not assimilate a foreign culture completely due to her indigenous cultural roots to apply Said's terminology.

Keywords: Culture, Identity, Postcolonialism, Dislocation, Diasporic Dislocation, Identity Crisis

1. Introduction

*Memory is a strange bell –
Jubilee and knell (Quotation by Emily Dickinson)
See, now they vanish,
The faces and places, with the self which, as
It could, loved them,
To become renewed transfigured, in another pattern.*¹

The above lines are drawn from the poems of Emily Dickinson and T.S. Eliot which tell us about memory and identity: about places and people who go through change and transformation to find their true identities. The elusive nature of identity is one of the prominent features of post-colonial discourse. Identity is, therefore, a process constantly being re-fashioned and redesigned in contemporary discourses.

An American Brat (2012) is a microcosmic novel. The novel highlights the personal issue of the loss and reposition of identity and global issue as suspicion between the East and the West in their writings. This study revolves around quest of identity through mimicry and racial

discrimination of the Muslims living in *America*. This study investigates the issue of identities through the subaltern (subordinate) eyes of a young Pakistani girl Feroza, who is the mouthpiece of Bapsi Sidhwa in her novel, *An American Brat* (2012). The research discusses how dilemmas for the nation-states and for those caught between the issues of racism attempt for reconciliation while downplaying the animosity (hostility). By highlighting the affirmation of humanity in the face of Muslims as Pakistanis in America through rehabilitation and repositioning of Pakistani young girl Feroza in the novel. The text highlights an insightful portrayal of the American and Pakistani cultures in the shape of the realization of loss and reposition (reconstruction) of identity of the heroin.

The current research focuses on the complex concept of identity(ies) about the construction of identity(ies) in the novel through a postcolonial lens. The conflict between transnational and transcultural about the issues of identity(ies) in terms of race, class, and nationality, has become the major issue for the foreigners living in America. The novel explores the straining relationship between the East and the West in the shape of the clash of civilizations and the continuing cost of ethnic profiling. Hall (1996) argues that 'race' should be understood not as referring to genetic essence, but as a 'floating signifier', whose meaning is never fixed. It is in this context that Sidhwa tries to explore the relationship/assimilation between two different and almost opposing cultures. Postcolonial portrayal of the colonized is one of the primary concerns of the writer thereby she tries to explore its implication. She tries to tackle the issues and reasons of mimicry and the quest for loss and reposition of identity about racial discrimination. Thus the same issue is taken up, which shows the America's assumptions of superiority and its insistence to treat the Eastern culture and peoples as "Others" within the context of their own cultural and political identities; on the contrary the people of the East wants to adopt the American Culture and yield their own cultural values and identities.

2. Literature Review

Theorists explain identity as to 'trash' one set of ideas and celebrate another. According to them subjectivity and identity is 'constructed within discourse.' Identity is always unstable, fragmented, and contingent. The defining features of post-communist societies are break-up of established identities and affiliations, the re-emergence of old identities, and repositioning of identities. Hall (1996) takes identity as an active process of representation or discursive construction. He explains identity as an "already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent", we should think instead of "identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation". Gilroy (1997) argues that 'people do make their own identities but not in circumstances of their own choosing and from resources they inherit that will always be incomplete'. In the short story titled *Laid off Man*, a postcolonial writer Javed Kazmi also highlights the cultural and economic problems of America with disastrous consequence for the individuals.

Sidhwa tries to explore the conflict between the indigenous and foreign cultures. Feroza, the protagonist of the novel, is described as a mimic woman of American society as she feels proud to be the part of America. She totally assimilates herself with the American culture and mimics it. Ralph sing' apostasy in Naipaul's (a colonial politician) *The Mimic Men* (1967) argues:

We pretended to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New World, one unknown corner of it, with all its reminders of the corruption that came so quickly to the new (p. 146).

For assimilation, the colonized people would mimic their masters during the colonial days. It can be seen in the case of Feroza who mimics and adopts the American culture. Homi K Bhabha (1994) in his book *The Location of Culture* argues that mimicry is a mode of colonial discourse when he argues, "Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which "appropriates" 'the Other' as it visualizes power."

Macaulay (1958, p. 49) describes European learning and colonial power as "a class of interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect". However, when Feroza was treated as lesser and inferior, she returned to her real roots. Anderson (1983, p. 89) describes the signs of racial and cultural superiority, through the figure of mimicry as 'the inner incompatibility of empire and nation'. In colonial hegemony, the basis of mimicry is partial presence, which articulates identity as a 'partial' vision of the colonizer's presence and alienates it from its essence. Mimicry can be represented as a camouflage.

Racism and Prejudice (1996) argues, "Discrimination is a manifestation of prejudice which can be both individual and systemic, and overt or subtle. It limits the quantity of resources available to a group and limits their access to resources.' Sidhwa in her novel shows the racial discrimination which highlights the superiority of one group e.g. America and inferiority of others e.g., Muslims (Pakistani) based on cultural values and norms. As inferiors are always treated differently and are called oppressed people. The racial and cultural Othering as represented in the form of Feroza is reflected by Americans attitude. Similarly, Forster (1981) describes the relationship between the masters (colonizers) and subjects (colonized) and argues that love or friendship is not possible among them. It is because of racial and cultural differences between the two nations who are poles apart from each other. The second important aspect of this impossibility is due to their master slave relationship. Therefore, the colonizers/masters manipulate their (colonized) identities. In this context, Hall (1996) for example says:

Cultural identity...is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being." It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation.

In postcolonial literature, both the colonized and the colonizers are under the verge of identity crises. They blame each other. The colonized are uncivilized and uneducated as their masters are thinking of, and the colonizers are corrupt and enviable as the colonized think of. However, their identities are internally collapsed, and the result is the assimilation of others culture as mostly colonized people prefer to adopt the culture of colonizers. It is exemplified that Post 9/11 situation is well mentioned in *Identity Crisis in Pakistan* (Nazar, 2013).

The post-colonial state of Pakistan is faced with identity-related challenges, and is struggling to define its identity, particularly from the onset of the 9/11 attacks on the United States. Parallel movements are running across the landscape of Pakistan, as some demand an Islamic state, some a multinational state, some fight for a secular one, and some a democratic Islamic republic, and if Islamic state, again beset with complexity as to what type of Islamic state, Shia or Sunni Pakistan should be and to what degree.

Mudassar Nazar has skilfully highlighted the internal issues of Pakistan, which has created problems of internal identity crises. This forces the people to dream of the west and assimilate themselves with that culture as they get an opportunity. They reject their own culture and adopt the western culture. Mostly, they feel hesitation with their own cultural identity which is not accepted to the west. Therefore, the rejection of their culture is inevitable while they start to mimic that culture. The rejection also leads to the rejection of identity and assimilation means the adaptation of identity. In both cases mostly immigrants are neither accepted to their culture nor accepted to the settled country. Therefore, the crises of identity emerge, and the immigrants' quest for identity falls in trouble in which they mostly fail to assimilate any of the cultural identity.

The Western dominance of power perceived the East as the "Other." For the Western Orientalises the people of the East are considered (distilled) as backwards, primitives, exotics, mysterious, despotic and inferiors. The Westerns superiority is apprehended through its innovations, its cultural materialism, its financial structure, and welfare. As Edward Said (1978) proves the supremacy of the West over the "Other" (East) through knowledge production under multi layered power relations in the cross-culture encounter. The word "terrorist" is usually engaged to the Muslims of the East as the West calls them "a prototype of closed traditionalistic societies." In the novel, the protagonist travels to America in quest of her mother dream of American, but while pursuing that dream, is caught unawares with the primeval question of his own cultural roots and identity.

Professor Matthew Kirschenbaum (2014) comments about the stereotypical images of America as represented with 'short cropped' hair and an 'expensive chest' which are typical of a certain type of America. In this context, Sidhwa not only represents the stereotypical cultural images of America but also of Pakistani culture in her novel *An American Brat* (2012).

3. Methodology

This is a qualitative research using an eclectic approach, which is the combination of Edward Sarian and Homi K Bhabha frameworks. Both the theorists have given their views on postcolonialism. Edward Said discusses the representation of the colonized as propounded by the colonizers, while Bhabha talks about the dislocation of those immigrants who are living in foreign countries. As a result, they could assimilate in that culture; while in this process of assimilation, they have lost their own indigenous culture and values. The results show that identity crisis is a pertinent concept in diasporic literature and the protagonist in the novel under discussion goes certain transformations. In this process, the heroin of the novel faces a dislocation and a cultural crisis in terms of her cultural identity. She could not assimilate a foreign culture completely due to her indigenous cultural roots to apply Said's terminology.

4. Discussion

In post-colonial literature identity plays a vital role at both metropolitan and margin. The debate is unique in terms of superiority and inferiority. East is uncivilized, irrational, uneducated while west is corrupt and enviable. It is seen in postcolonial literature that people from the third world countries assimilate themselves to the western culture and abrogate their own identity due to exploitation in their countries. The process is called mimicry, which is employed in the writings of postcolonial writers. The immigrants adopt the western culture and imitate their way of life. The very process gives them another identity which is neither accepted to the native culture

nor to the mimicked one. Therefore, the identity crises develop in another way and the victim of these crises develops their quest for identity. They often stay successful but mostly they fail.

The issue of identity is central to a discussion in Post-colonial literature and, especially in the South Asian literature. The context of identity is highly paid in Pakistani writers because they personally experienced the identity crises in the west. Therefore, the identity is a debated term. Identity crises is primarily caused in the Pakistani writers due to dislocation. *An American Brat* Sidhwa (2012) gives the same images of identity at home and diaspora. Pakistani identity is shown conservative and restricted and backwardness has been assimilated to it while American cultural identity is shown liberal from every aspect. Therefore, the people who live in diaspora fall in the clash of cultural identities. The immigrants have the vision to enjoy the freedom available in the west through mimicry and finally they lose their indigenous identity. In this context, 'An American Brat I' presents a fine example of identity crises which has been portrayed through various characters.

In the novel, Sidhwa shows the suffering of Feroza from her own culture. However, she does not pursue the American dream, but her mother sends her to United States for good education under the supervision of her uncle Manek who is living in America. Although the protagonist reaches America, yet she does not enjoy her stay initially. Feroza enjoys her liberal position through mimicry, but at the end she does not develop her identity in the novel and gets depressed. Her friend, Ghazal, keeps her relaxed in the context of being dislocated and rejected by her boyfriend David. She rebuffs her country, the state of Pakistan and even her religion, traditions and custom.

Identity is two dimensional when practiced in postcolonial literature. One is called identity as being based on commonality and unit which is mandatory while the second one is identity formation through discontinuity which is truer and related to the settled country. The former is due to Diasporas. The word irrational, uncivilized is assimilated to the people from the third world countries though they settle in the west; still they entertain the same identities in diaspora as well. *An American Brat*, Sidhwa presents the prototypical stereotyped images of the eastern people as Feroza and her uncle Manek are mocked and ridiculed. They are called stupid and the word 'desis' is assigned to them. Feroza and Manek are deprived of their identity and they are essentialized with the same identity as western usually give to the eastern people while Sidhwa in this context is portraying the identity of Pakistani people from American perspective. The protagonist of the novel becomes the victim of identity crises as traps in the staircase that is symbolized for the power of American over third world countries. The incident creates fear, darkness, and uncertainty for the identity of Feroza.

In America, the young girl from Pakistan cannot face the worst realities available to Pakistani people. Feroza as a student feels offensive with discomfort living in these realities of desis as she sees Manek used to go to quality restaurant for good lunch and dinners. He usually leaves hotel without paying bills by making different excuses; they (Feroza and Manek) scanned the menu and, after discussion and dithering during which Manek remarked two or three times, "Don't worry about the prices-order what you like . . . I have coupons. We pay for one dinner and get other free." (p. 141). In the same way Feroza represents the same image as she goes to mall with Jo:

Going to the moll with Jo was a hair rising experience. She was a slick thief. Jo seldom bought or let Feroza buy necessities. Toothpaste, shampoo, chocolates,

razors, lotions, ballpoint pens were purloined as and when required. She occasionally paid for or made Feroza pay for a bag of potato chips or some item too bulky to be easily lifted (p. 153).

These images of brown people in the lens of west construct a ridiculed identity. They present the typical identity of Pakistani people as Feroza the protagonist of the novel acts a contemptuous way when she comes to America for the first time. Her dealing is shown like a typical girl: no proper dress, she presents a desi accent which is enjoyed by her uncle Manek by calling her desi. Further, she is avoided of staring people in America which is the symbol of third world moron in America.

Feroza position is not clear because she cannot hold her position with her desi identity as well as she cannot adopt the American culture because America is full of filth to Feroza as she assimilates it with an exotic country. Her quest for identity is put to danger. Diaspora identities are caught in hybrid cultures that freezes individuals, unable them to move, espousing the postcolonial experience embedded by colonial occurrence in the mind, the communal cataleptic of the colonized nation which cannot be petered out.

To hold her position, Feroza is forced to mimic the American culture, which may bring a prosperous life as she has seen in her uncle Manek who has developed his position to arrogance and superiority. Manek has adopted the American culture as he changes his name by adopting the American identity. Surprisingly, Feroza finds that Manek Junglewalla is now Mike Junglewalla, who tries to fit into the American society. Further, he seems to be Americanised than American as he calls Feroza in the racist way; "Manek said:

Why do you Third World Pakis shout so much? 'what do you mean, 'Paki'. . . What re' you, some snow-white Englishman? Oh ...God . . .please don't bring your gora complex with you.' Feroza screams back at him: 'What do you mean you desis? What're you? A German?' (pp. 25-26).

Therefore, Manek starts to teach Feroza 'How-to Live-in America,' she is taught how to use elevator, wearing jeans and Paints, flying to the world of rock stars and feel free in America. In this way her identity becomes changed. She develops multiple identities and the concept of multiple identities crises is developed, as Americans do not accept her identity to be American while she herself rejects her own identity. Furthermore, she rejects her homeland in mimicry, losing her identity in America. The adopted culture is updated and pure to her and she scolds her culture as she talks on phone, 'why do you third world Pakis shout too much?' (p. 26). Again, 'amid the excitement of transporting herself to her dream land, this touches a chord somewhere and she asks her parents: "... Why am I a Paki third worlder?" (p. 27).

Feroza's adaptation of American identity is seen in Harvard when she feels happy and she recalls the irritating events when she was kicked out of the Cinema in Lahore. The happiness is the symbol of her freedom in American. She is exclusively assimilated to American culture as she comes to enrol in a university where liquor, smoking, prostitution, and dances are banned but instead of that she does not care and finally adopts the American culture. Further, Jo plays a significant role in her assimilation to American culture. She teaches her American language, to wear jeans, t-shirts, blouses even her legs are shown naked in the novel as she could not do that in Pakistan. 'It's not decent to show your legs in Pakistan (p. 151)'. Furthermore, Feroza complaints to Jo that she should not bring boys home; however, Jo stimulates her towards boys

'you aren't used to boys. So, okay- get used to them (p. 163). In the company of Jo, Feroza becomes addicted to the company of boys and drinking; her identity is exclusively changed in adopting the American way of life, though still she repents and thinking of her family in Pakistan. However, she has assimilated the American culture.

Next, she meets David and falls in love with him. In the process, they physically come closer to each other and sexual desires take place. When David parents ask her for her religion, she does not feel ashamed now of herself being an American citizen to marry a Jewish boy and seeks permission from her family in Pakistan. The issue of Feroza is not acceptable due to cast and religion but instead the youngsters of Feroza family support her. Bapsi Sidhwa shows how youngsters are stimulated to adopt the American culture. It is not only Feroza who is unhappy with her parental culture but the others as well.

Finally, her mother Zareena reaches America to prevent Feroza from marrying David. She is received by David and Feroza. Feroza receives threats from her mother about her marriage with a Jewish which is against the culture and faith of Zoroastrian. If she marries a Jewish boy, she will not be allowed to attend her grandmother and parent's funeral. In the context of both mother and daughter the conflict between identities of two cultures takes place. Zareena wants to make Feroza to understand in Paris way while Feroza takes her mother in American way; 'and you'll have to look at it our way. It's not your culture! You can't toss your heritage like that. It's in your bones (p. 279)'. Feroza is no more in position to accept her own cultural identity and prefer the American culture. However, the tussles between mother and daughter go on. Finally, the mother herself forget the purpose of her visit as she is enjoying in America along with Feroza and David.

Zareena identity becomes a doubtful one as she shows interest in American culture. Her identity of American culture relaxes her attitude towards David as she informs David about Zoroastrian's rituals and custom, but David simply rejects her opinion and prefers his Jewish culture. The very core example of rejection of Parsi culture by David shows the relationship of east and west in which west shows its superiority over east in the form of David. Further, David finds that his culture is different from Feroza's culture and they cannot live together. Therefore, he changes his decision and leaves Feroza by excusing that he got another job in California. Though, Feroza gets shocked and feels insecure. She is in position neither to leave America nor can go to Pakistan. She is left with a choice to marry any of her three cousins in Pakistan. Now, she is ready to recall her past to favour her precious identity to adopt her culture, religion, society, music, and those memories which she held in Pakistan. The current identity provokes her to look back to her earlier identity, which was natural and pure, but she is now a changed girl who cannot turn to her earlier identity.

Bapsi Sidhwa shows that Feroza identity is accepted neither by her indigenous culture nor by the American. Therefore, her quest for identity is threatened. Although the American culture brought her prosperity and happiness, she has been given freedom from restricted culture full of poverty, insecurity, oppression of woman based on discrimination against woman. The mimicked identity is the source of her existence in the whole novel. Now she is not ready to go back to Pakistan, even it is tolerable for her to stay in America rather than to leave her existence to her fate in Pakistan. Therefore, she is unable to give off all those tastes of life which she has tasted in America while they were prohibited in Pakistan. Feroza, the protagonist of the novel loses her identity in the context of mimicry as she fully adopted the American culture and was

unable to reconstruct or adopt her earlier identity. She lives in a dilemma to adopt either culture, but her harsh experiences of America forces her to relocate her identity, but she simply fails.

To sum up the above analysis, it is shown that Sidhwa's representation of characters in terms of identity is right and realistic. It is said that Sidhwa herself represents a part of American life as she spent her life there. Therefore, her account of the depiction of Feroza might resonate with her own life in America. She builds up a unique style for identity through migration and dislocation. The novel represents the theme of migration, identity crises, loss of identity, to relocate identity, poverty in home, getting prominent position, dream of liberty and freedom, orientation towards sexuality, restrictions of culture and social taboos. All these themes are based on the actual identity crises in the novel. The quest of identity by the characters stays unfulfilled and they do not recognize their identity either indigenous or foreign. Female characters fail while male characters get no harm as they constitute the same identity in the home as they owned.

5. Conclusion

The novel, *An American Brat* represents the question of identity, which is a complex issue, and must be answered and understood through scholastic discussions. The characters of the novel try to adopt and fit into the American culture. The American culture is exotic to them which neither accept them nor identified them. Neglecting her culture by Feroza put her in trouble as David has rejected her, means the rejection by American culture while her denial of her own culture keeps her away from cultural identity as well. Thus, the issues of identity and hybridity can be related to Feroza as she lives in diaspora while rejected by both cultures. Therefore, living in a diaspora can be called a third space or hybrid which has been a providential location occupied by Feroza. She has been given the choice to select the best of both worlds America and Pakistan; she enjoys the freedoms of the free world without any obstacle, the American society is a permissive for Feroza that would be unheard or unseen in her homeland. However, the author could not resolve the issue of identity through the portrayals of her characters, rather, is inclined to problematise the fragmentation and dichotomous nature of an ongoing quest for the self and the identity.

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Note:

¹ Quotation by T. S. Eliot's Four Quartets.