DIASPORA AND AN AMERICAN BRAT BY BAPSI SIDHWA

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ABSTRACT

The motive of this study is to examine the occurrences of diaspora in An American Brat by Bapsi Sidhwa and associate its nature, degree and impact on the characters of the book and possibly derive a relationship with author's point of view. Diaspora is a significant concept of literature and is a strong outcome of post colonialism. The article evaluates the forces of diaspora through other closely linked phenomena's basis established by the theories given by renowned theorists namely Homi K. Bhaba, Edward W. Said etc. Diaspora brings a metamorphosis in the characters' personalities proposed in the novel and evolution of the characters through the struggle to adapt on foreign soil. The study concludes the impacts of the various elements of diaspora such as identity, hybridity, mimicry, alienation and orientalism being highly dynamic and eventually turning things for favorable acceptance in the story.

KEYWORDS

Post Colonialism, Diaspora, Cultural Identity, Hybridity, Mimicry, Alienation and Orientalism.

Post-colonialism refers to the period after the colonialism and furthermore signifies the relationship between the colonizers, the European countries and the colonized, the Third World countries. Colonialism was the era when the European nations took control over the Third World countries and exploited people's lives in numerous ways. Colonialism stepped over people's social freedom, shook their psychological states and crushed their cultural identity and beliefs. People were like slaves on their own motherland. The colonizers used to decide the guidelines for the colonized to live by and there were strict punishments for those who disobeyed. People were utterly at the mercy of the colonizers.

After the disintegration of the European control over the Third World countries, Post-colonial literature evolved as one of the most popular facets of English literature especially since 1970. A strong product of all the previous tensions is highly evident in Post-colonial literature in which the colonized presented their dissatisfaction out of the effects of the colonialism and their resistance to and struggle to survive under such impacts. The usual themes depicted by most of the Post-colonial writers are the fight for freedom, national values, cultural identity, nostalgia and detachment. The writers from the countries which were once or still are the colonies of European nations often tend to satirize the colonizers for their efforts of justifying colonialism. Their writings cherish their cultural greatness against the notion of inferiority that's gradually and minutely inculcated in the global society against the colonized. Further, in the same line, one of the major influences of
The word “diaspora” means the dispersion or displacement of people from their homeland. This term is derived from a Greek word “diaspeirō” that refers to scattering or spreading about. In expansion to the understanding of diaspora, the people generally have a memory of their native place as they believe their roots are their ancestral places and that's where they actually belong. The place proffers them an identity of their own. Thus, there's almost always a tendency in them to return to their place of origin.

Diaspora underlines the feeling of rootlessness. People nurture an attachment with their motherland irrespective of the reasons for which they have been away from it. Discussing about the reasons, there are two possible bases for one to move away from their native place: voluntary or involuntary/forced. These bases may further have contributing reasons such as war, recession, economic depression, political tension, cultural beliefs, social stress, personal reasons or lifestyle differences among the people in the society.

Types of Diaspora:

There can be a number of methods to classify and enlist Diaspora for its lengthy, complex and omnipresent nature. However, it is classified into four major types below:

1. Victim Diaspora: When people are banished away from their native land.
2. Trading Diaspora: When people move from their own country to another countries to conduct trade.
3. Imperial Diaspora: When people go to other regions which are conquered by their nation.
4. Labor Diaspora: When people are transported to other countries for labor.

Other than these, diaspora can be found and kept in many more categories according to the elements and features of diaspora. According to Mr. Khachig Toloyan, one of the founders of field of diaspora studies and founding editor of the award winning DIASPORA: A Journal of Transnational Studies, in writing, diaspora is of two distinct types: Emic and Etic. Emic diaspora represents mostly the autobiographical journey of the writer whereas the Etic diaspora is the representation of some scholarly work. Diaspora has been a subject of writing for a number of authors and novelists who somewhere in their life were dislocated from their native country or were influenced by such events from others’ life. Bapsi Sidhwa is one of such prominent writers of diaspora. “We are not worthless because we inhabit a country which is seen by Western eyes as a primitive, fundamental country only....I mean, our lives are very much worth living” (1).

In An American Brat, the concept of identity, both personal and cultural is present. Cultural identity is what gives a shape to an individual, no matter where he comes from. Cultural identity is a feeling of belongingness to a certain group or a community. It is a segment of an individual's self-conception and set of his choices and principles in life. This comes into existence by virtue of chronic habits, rituals, traditions and practices being performed by the people of the similar class and region. It consists of various aspects of life of a person such as religion, dressing, physical features, food choices etc. Cultural identity is not only visible through actions but thoughts also. The thoughts direct actions and thus, cultural identity leads the way of life of people on this entire earth.

Zareen's perspective in the start of the novel depicts her grave concern for one's identity. The story opens from the event of Zareen being terribly restless for her daughter’s upbringing in a society where no modernity lies. Zareen discusses with Cyrus, her husband about Feroza's mindset being narrowed. “She’s becoming more and more backward every day” (9). Zareen continues to tell her husband the way socio-political environment has influenced Feroza's behavior. “She won’t even answer the phone anymore! ‘What if it’s someone I don’t know?’ “Zareen mimicked her daughter in English. “I told her – don’t be silly. No one’s going to jump out of the phone to bite you!” (10).

Zareen feels considerably bothered by the prevailing system and practices in Pakistan and their disastrous impacts on her young daughter's mental development and so shares with her husband. “Could you imagine Feroza cycling to school now? She'd be a freak! Those goondas would make vulgar noises and bump into her, and the mullahs would tell her to cover her head. Instead of moving forward, we are moving backward. What I could do in ’59 and ’60, my daughter can't do in 1978! Our Parsee children in Lahore won't know how to mix with Parsee kids in Karachi or Bombay” (11). Thereafter, she talks about the image of a woman in her culture and nation where fundamentalism had made the existence of respectable and liberal identity almost impossible. Propelled by such circumstances only, Zareen decides to send off her daughter Feroza to America where again she is a stranger and has no native identity but has to adapt to American culture.

Stuart Hall in his book Cultural Identity and Diaspora observes: “…identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past” (236). The conflict and concern regarding cultural identity leading to one's individual identity continues to be visible in America also when Feroza can't help but recall the whole different version of her in Pakistan back then. “Feroza was riven by bouts of guilt. Once when she was sneaking back into her room at three o'clock in the morning with her shoes in her hand, she wondered if she was the same girl who had lived in Lahore and gone to the Convent of the Sacred Heart” (264).

According to Homi K. Bhaba's theory of “Otherness”, there's a fine line between “cultural differences” and “cultural diversity”. Cultural differences are there among people of two different regions who are unknown to the history and practices of each others' community while cultural diversity is simply the distinct nature of the cultures followed in different regions and countries and are to be regarded by others. Similar grounds are laid off in the culmination of An American Brat when the protagonist of the novel Feroza Ginwalla realizes that to exist in...
American society; she does not have to sacrifice her own values and culture. The understanding of cultural diversity and co-existence can be abstracted from the plot as the novel ends with Feroza's realization, that in order to survive on an alien land, she does not have to cut off her own culture from herself. Edward Said states thus “Far more than they fight, cultures coexist and interact fruitfully with each other” (52). She re-adopts her Sudra and Kusti (cultural marks), cites Ahura Mazda's blessings and takes a decision that “There would be no going back for her, but she could go back at will” (317).

Exploring more of diaspora in the story, another element of diaspora, orientalism shows up. The word “orientalism” refers to the characteristics and cultures of Asian people. It distinguishes the way they appear quite unlikely to the western world and their practices. Said writes: “The more one is able to leave one's cultural home, the more easily is one able to judge it, and the whole world as well, with the spiritual detachment and generosity necessary for true vision. The more easily, too, does one assess oneself and alien cultures with the same combination of intimacy and distance” (259).

Bapsi Sidhwa has also clearly illustrated the way fundamentalism made life suffocating and uneasy in Pakistan. She has shown the conventional Asian traits in the personality of the characters in the novel through various means namely the fixed type of clothes considered to be appropriate for women, deserving a much regulated extent of freedom and marrying someone from one's own community etc. Also, she has provided a base for the gradual transition in their mindsets and personalities namely how Feroza turns from a shy girl into an independent bold woman. Earlier she says “I'm sorry, I don't think I'll be able to act in the play. You know how it is – my father won't like it. Please don't come again. Don't phone, please” (16). Followed by the transformation in America, she quite bravely makes up her mind to marry David, a non-Parsee guy and when it doesn't go along her expectations, she handles her emotional self very sensibly.

Another dive into the diasporic waters of the novel gets the elements namely mimicry and hybridity nurturing in the characters. Mimicry refers to the act of imitation of the culture of the colonizers by the colonized. Usually, to fit in, the dislocated people tend to adopt the mannerism of the Western and European world as with their native lifestyle, they feel inferior in that advanced societal setup. Manek, Feroza and Zareen belong to Pakistani roots and values but they feel fascinated to the American culture and lifestyle. As per the level of exposure and their psyche, all three of them develop modern habits. Manek has been living in U.S for a considerable number of years and all his habits and life-style have thoroughly changed. He, no more, feels alien to the American culture and rituals. When he talks to Feroza over a phone call, he sounds foreigner through his statement. “Don’t yell, Manek said. "You're puncturing my eardrum. Why do you Third World Pakis shout so much? Everybody's not deaf” (26). Manek continues to talk in that manner to which Feroza exclaims “What do you mean, ‘Paki.’ What’re you, some snow-white Englishman?” (26).

Later in the story, Manek again highlights the element of mimicry when he changes his name for the sake of Americans to get it easily and relate to him but Feroza seems to disapprove of this. She couldn’t help it. “Mike?” she asked, her appalled voice conjuring up Jo's unpleasant boyfriend. “You’ve become a Mike?” Manek remained calm. “The people I have to deal with at work find it hard to remember Manek. It’s too foreign, it makes them uneasy. But I’m one of the guys if I’m Mike” (260).

As the plot of the novel proceeds, the characters become hybrids. The word ‘hybrid’ means ‘mixture’ of the two or more things. Thus, hybridity is basically the concept that highlights the process of mixing up of two different races and cultures. Homi K. Bhaba, in his works, supports the idea that hybridity has been present in all the cultures and no culture is pure as it has always been influenced by the intervening cultures and traditions. The same element of hybridity is apparent in Bapsi Sidhwa's An American Brat. Manek, Feroza and Zareen visit America and willingly mix up with the host culture. As the plot progresses, Feroza very well adapts into American social setup and the incident of Feroza falling in love with David and wanting to marry him gives initiation to the base of occurrence of hybridity. She writes a letter to inform her family about her will to marry David.

Feroza wrote that she had met a wonderful boy at the University. Like her, he was also very shy. She had agreed to marry him. She knew they would be very upset, particularly her grandmothers, at the thought of her marrying a non-Parsee. His parents were Jews. The religious differences did not matter so much in America. They had decided to resolve the issue by becoming Unitarians. “Please, don’t be angry, and please try to make both my grannies understand. I love you all so much. I won’t be able to bear it if you don’t accept David” (266). However, followed by a number of events, especially the ones manipulated by Feroza's mother, their love doesn't culminate into a wed-lock.

Feroza spends three years in America and turns out to be a bold woman with a firm voice and decision making ability which were the rare features to be found in a girl from a fundamentalism dominated country. She behaves like a global citizen now and understands that she has to stay strong and survive in this world. Furthermore, Feroza's mother, Zareen also is affected by the liberty and modernity in American air. She quickly and easily adjusts in American society during her visit to Feroza.

The stark contrast in the lifestyles of the two nations leads to the induction of alienation in characters. Alienation is the term that reckons to the withdrawal or disintegrating of a person or a person's affections from something or position of earlier attachment. It also defines how someone may have different outlook and connection with some specific entity after passing through a span of time and series of circumstances.

In the novel, An American Brat, the theme of Alienation is quite present. It appears as a highlight in form of the events of portrayal of the beliefs and persona of the protagonist of the novel, Feroza who initially likes to follow Pakistani leaders and feels embarrassed because of her mother wearing a sleeveless blouse. Zareen complains to Cyrus how Feroza objects upon the manner Zareen dresses up. "In the car she said: ‘Mummy, please don't come to school dressed like that.’ She objected to my sleeveless sari-blouse! Really, this narrow-minded attitude
touted by General Zia is infecting her, too. I told her: ‘Look, we’re Parsee, everyone knows we dress differently’(10). Also, Feroza holds great respect and belief in Pakistani leaders and systems in the first half of the novel and she even tends to follow the mannerism reflecting through those people. She is shown advocating their work and holding a stand for them when needed. “Don’t you dare say anything about Bhutto. Are you ashamed, speaking ill of someone who is facing death just because he’s the voice of the masses?” (124). But, later, after having the taste of liberty in U.S.A, Feroza becomes so fond of modernity and feels it nearly impossible to return to her native conservative community. Sidhwa describes through the comprehensibility of Feroza what’s opined by Karl Marx “Social progress can be measured by the social position of the female sex.” She can easily witness the distinction between the cultures and all the other aspects of life in the two nations. Her bond with the American lifestyle broadens her mentality and lets her think in a new spirit.

Under the category of Post-colonial literature, An American Brat is one of the most elegant creations by Bapsi Sidhwa. While merely the superficial reading of the storyline gives its readers immense pleasure through its outstanding expression, metamorphosis of its characters in two different worlds and the in-depth study of the novel provides valuable knowledge of diaspora and its various elements that are engraved beautifully by the author and can be traced out through close and meticulous observation. Not only the readers appreciate the story-telling of Bapsi Sidhwa, but also the novel deals with a number of critical concepts from the era of colonialism till contemporary relevance and also derives a logical relationship between those concepts in the most realistic manner revealing both the positive and negative aspects without any bias.

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WORKS CITED


Important questions and answers relating to "An American Brat" by Bapsi Sidhwa. Q. What are the major changes that Feroza Ginwalla experiences when she moves to America in the book American Brat by Bapsi Sidhwa? I think that in answering this question, you want to look for both subtle and obvious differences between what Feroza was evolving into in Pakistan and what she becomes in America. I think you can look at some obvious elements in terms of demeanor, body language, voice (both internal and spoken), clothing and fashion choice, and overall demeanor. You might be able to see the differences between Feroza in Pakistan, becoming increasingly conservative, and Feroza in American Bapsi Sidhwa is one of such prominent writers of diaspora. "We are not worthless because we inhabit a country which is seen by Western eyes as a primitive, fundamental country only....I mean, our lives are very much worth living" (1). In An American Brat, the concept of identity, both personal and cultural is present. Cultural identity is what gives a shape to an individual, no matter where he comes from. Cultural identity is a feeling of belongingness to a certain group or a community.