
CULTURAL IDENTITY AND DIASPORIC TRANSFORMATION IN *AN AMERICAN BRAT*

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Abstract

An American Brat by Bapsi Sidhwa makes a significant study of identity crisis in which the diasporic transformation of the protagonist presents arresting sequence of events. The novel traces the journey of Feroza Ginwalla, a young Parsi girl from Pakistan, who undergoes a profound transformation after migrating to the United States. Using a postcolonial and diasporic framework, this study explores issues of identity crisis, hybridity, cultural negotiation, and gender roles. It argues that migration leads to a reconfiguration of identity shaped by cross-cultural interactions. The paper also highlights generational conflict and the tension between tradition and modernity. Ultimately, the study concludes that identity in the novel is fluid and continuously evolving, rather than fixed or singular.

Keywords: Diaspora, Cultural Identity, Hybridity, Crisis, Migration, Gender, Assimilation

Set in the city of Lahore and the United States, Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat* (1993) is a significant contribution to diasporic and postcolonial literature. The novel narrates the story of Feroza Ginwalla, a young Parsi girl from Lahore who is sent to the United States to escape the socio-political pressures of Pakistan during General Zia-ul-Haq's regime. What begins as a temporary relocation becomes a transformative journey that reshapes her identity. The novel reflects the complexities of migration and identity formation in a globalized world. As Feroza transitions from a conservative Pakistani upbringing to a liberal American environment, she encounters cultural conflicts that challenge her beliefs and values. This paper explores how Sidhwa represents how identity changes and adapts and is shaped by diasporic experiences.

Diaspora and Identity: A Theoretical Perspective

Diaspora refers to the displacement of individuals from their homeland, and their subsequent engagement with new cultural environments. It involves maintaining connections to one's own heritage while adapting to new cultures. In *An American Brat*, Feroza embodies this hybridity. Initially rooted in Pakistani traditions, she gradually adopts aspects of American culture, resulting in a hybrid identity. According to Riaz et al., diasporic individuals often experience "identity crisis and cultural dislocation". The protagonist of the novel becomes the victim of identity crisis as traps in the staircase that is symbolised for the power of America over third world countries. The incident creates fear, darkness and uncertainty for the identity of Feroza. (Riaz, Malik, and Rahman 36). Such a crisis and dislocation can be seen in Feroza's transformation as a process of negotiation between competing cultural influences.

Cultural Conflict and Identity Crisis:

A central theme in the novel is the conflict between Eastern and Western cultures. Feroza's upbringing in Lahore is marked by strict social norms, religious values, and familial expectations. However, her exposure to American culture introduces her to ideals of freedom, individuality, and self-expression. This cultural clash leads to an identity crisis. Initially, Feroza struggles to adapt to her new environment, feeling alienated and confused. Over time, she begins to question her traditional beliefs and embraces new ways of thinking. Feroza's transformation is evident in her changing behaviour, appearance, and attitudes. She adopts Western clothing, becomes more assertive, and challenges traditional norms, particularly in relation to gender roles and relationships.

Diasporic Transformation and Identity:

Feroza's journey illustrates the concept of diasporic transformation. Her identity evolves as she navigates between her Pakistani heritage and American influences. Gomaa argues that diasporic identities are characterized by a "constant negotiation between ethnic roots and adaptation to a new culture" (Gomaa). Feroza's experience

exemplifies this negotiation. While she adopts many aspects of American culture, she does not entirely abandon her roots. In this hybrid identity, however, underlies a disturbing conflict. Her journey highlights the complexities of belonging in a diasporic context. Feroza experiences moments of alienation and confusion as she struggles to reconcile her dual cultural affiliations. Sometimes she feels guilty, but sometimes she defends her assimilation in American culture as “a phenomenal leap in perceiving the world from a wider, bolder and happier angle” (Sidhwa 163-164)

Language and Identity:

Language plays a significant role in Feroza’s transformation. Her exposure to American English and colloquial expressions reflects her gradual incorporation into American society. Language becomes a tool for navigating cultural spaces and expressing identity. Feroza’s linguistic adaptation symbolizes her shifting sense of self and belonging.

Gender Roles and Feminine Identity:

The novel also explores the impact of cultural transformation on gender roles. In Pakistan, Feroza is expected to adhere to the traditional expectations of femininity, including obedience, modesty, and eventual marriage. In contrast, American society offers her greater freedom and autonomy. On the subject of marriage she says, “I refuse to die as an old maid.” (Sidhwa 240) She becomes more independent, pursues education, and makes personal choices regarding relationships. Feroza’s transformation can thus be seen as a form of feminist awakening, where she challenges patriarchal norms and asserts her individuality.

Generational Conflict:

Generational conflict is another important theme in the novel. Feroza’s mother, Zareen, initially sends her to America to protect her from the conservative environment of Pakistan. However, she later becomes concerned about her daughter’s transformation. This conflict reflects the tension between tradition and modernity. While Zareen represents the older generation’s adherence to cultural values, Feroza represents a new, globalized identity. Their relationship highlights the challenges faced by immigrant families in maintaining cultural continuity. When Zareen enquires about Feroza’s boyfriend, David’s ancestry and family relations, Feroza says, ‘If you go about talking of people’s pedigree, the Americans will laugh at you.’ (Sidhwa 277).

The Influence of American Culture:

American culture plays a crucial role in shaping Feroza’s identity. The novel portrays America as a land of opportunity and freedom, but it also critiques its materialism and individualism. Feroza’s attraction to American lifestyle illustrates this appeal, while her struggles reveal its limitations.

Identity as a Fluid Construct:

One of the central arguments of this paper is that identity in *An American Brat* is fluid and dynamic. Feroza’s journey demonstrates that identity is not fixed but constantly evolving. Her transformation reflects the broader experience of diasporic individuals, who must navigate multiple cultural identities. Sidhwa challenges the notion of a singular identity, instead presenting it as a process of continuous negotiation.

Conclusion:

An American Brat offers a multifaceted exploration of cultural identity and diasporic transformation. According to Mishra, “In multicultural environments the minority communities face identity crisis. The consistent and stable identity constructs, seem to be collapsing due to fast social transformations, as a result, is seen the emergence of the concept of multiple identities.” (Mishra 29) Through Feroza’s journey, Bapsi Sidhwa highlights the complexities of migration, cultural conflict, and self-discovery. The novel demonstrates that identity is shaped by cultural interactions and personal experiences, rather than being fixed or predetermined. It also underscores the challenges of balancing tradition and modernity in a globalized world. Ultimately, Sidhwa presents identity as a fluid and evolving construct, reflecting the realities of diasporic life.



Works Cited:

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