
Individuation through Acculturation: Bapsy Sidhwa's *An American Brat***Krishna Mohan Pandey**

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Abstract: The paper aims at studying individuation through acculturation in Bapsy Sidhwa's novel *An American Brat*. The personality formation of the protagonist Feroza takes place through her association with her Muslim classmates in Karachi and exposure to the American society. It is a well-known truth that a writer's environment, natural, cultural or socio-political, influences her/his creative imagination. The protagonist and her mother attain individuation by asking relevant ethical questions on the basis of their experiences. What Sidhwa herself does in accepting the American identity while maintaining her Pakistani and Parsee identities intact, is dreamt by her young protagonist Feroza for whom there is no going back but the choice remains open.

Keywords: Individuation, Acculturation, Parsi, Brat, Olfactory.

The paper aims at studying individuation through acculturation in Bapsy Sidhwa's novel *An American Brat*. Individuation refers to the processes of personality formation. The term was used by Carl Jung for personality development, primarily during adolescence, though the process of individuation continues throughout our lives. Acculturation, on the other hand, indicates the process of imbibing the social mores and values of another culture at individual or group level while retaining one's own culture. Individuation has emerged as a prominent theme in the novel written by Bapsy Sidhwa, acclaimed to be one of the finest writers of Pakistan and the winner of its prestigious award, *Sitara-i-Imtiaz*.

I

The novel outlines the growth of a young Pakistani Parsee girl Feroza's coming of age through the experiences that she has in America. The time is late 1970s when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto is in jail and the Islamic fundamentalism is strengthening itself under the rule of General Zia Ul Haq in Pakistan. Disturbed by its increasing impact on their daughter, Feroza's parents, Zareen and Cyrus, send her to the United States for a short while so as to broaden her mental horizon. Her uncle Manek, a student of M.I.T. and only six years senior to her in age, makes her familiar with the American mode of living. The glitter of America takes her in its grip and she is permitted to stay for some more time taking admission in a small Idaho college where she falls in love with a handsome young American Jew David Press. Her Mother succeeds in breaking this love affair but fails to bring her daughter back to Pakistan and marry any of the several good Parsee boys she has seen for her. The novel ends on the note of Feroza's realization that going back to Pakistan means curbing her individual freedom for which she is not ready.

II

The first four chapters, specially the opening one, suggest Sidhwa's unwelcome stance at the increasing Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan. When Feroza asks her mother not to come to her school in sleeveless sari -blouse, she starts ruminating over the narrow mindedness infecting her daughter. She tells her that they belong to the Parsi community and "Everybody knows we dress differently." (*An American Brat* 10) Contrasting her own teen-age with that of her daughter, she tells her husband:

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? No. Women mustn't show their legs, women shouldn't dress like this, and women shouldn't act like that. Girls mustn't play hockey or sing or dance! If everything corrupts their pious minds so easily, then the *mullahs* should wear *burqas* and stay within the four walls of their houses! (10)

The Parsees have been very particular about their dress, aesthetic and intellectual aspiration, westernized clubs, drinks and food showing their proximity to the British colonizers

(Lurhman,41). She vehemently criticizes the retrograde steps prevailing in the society dominated by maulvis and mullahs: “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)

Worried at their daughter’s alarming backwardness, the parents decide to send her to America where Feroza’s maternal uncle Manek is studying at M.I.T. They do so with the assumption that travel “will broaden her outlook, get this puritanical rubbish out of her head.” (14) When Zareen’s mother Khutlibai hears about the plan, she is very much annoyed and says, “She’s too innocent and young to be sent “*there*.” (30) The novelist explains the connotations of stress on the word “there”. “The *there* was pregnant with unspeakable knowledge of the sexual license allowed American girls and the perils of drink and drugs. Compounding the danger were vivid images of rapists looking in dark alleys to entice, molest, and murder young girls.” (30) But the decision is not altered and it brings the young Feroza boundless delight. She repeats to herself, “I’m going to America, I’m going to America!” and the land of glossy magazines and of “Bewitched” and “Star Trek” land flashes before her mind’s eye. Before her departure, Feroza goes to the Fire Temple for her *Tandarosti* (*well being*) prayers and the novelist remarks that like “most Parsees, who know very little about their religion, Feroza had a comfortable relationship with the faith she was born into; she accepted it as did the color of her eyes or the length of her limbs.” (40)

On reaching the Kennedy Airport, she is amazed by the orderly traffic of rushing people, the bright lights and warmed air, the extraordinary cleanliness and sheen on the floors and furnishings and the audacious immensity of the glass and steel enclosed spaces. Her wondering joy reaches the lowest ebb when she has to face a volley of questions from the immigration officers exhibiting cultural gap. Simple questions are posed before her but her answers given in the typical Asian mentality put her in trouble. Her answer about the time span of her stay in the U.S. as “Two or three months” does not satisfy the American officers who want specific dates. Her reply about her uncle Manek being a student and also earning extra money requires him to clarify his position that he does those jobs for the university and with its permission. He has also to convince them that he gets sufficient money from his home for his studies. Meanwhile, an

officer finds a lacy pink nylon nightie and accuses her of telling a lie. In his opinion, she has come to marry Manek who is her fiancé. Despite Manek's arguments that she is her niece and his community's males do not marry their nieces, the officer is not satisfied. At this Feroza loses her temper and bursts out: "To hell with you and your damn country. I'll go back!" (64) The officer realizes that the inspector should not have talked to her like that and permits her to leave the airport.

Manek starts telling her that she must learn to control her temper and not to bother about "the honor-shoner business"(66) in America. She undergoes a very unpleasant experience in the bathroom of the YMCA Building where Manek has taken a room for a week. A young man using obscene language and gesture -("How ya doin', baby? Ya wanna poke?" and "Howja like it if I rub it up against ya?" (70)- tries to catch her but somehow she dodges him and reaches her room.

Manek takes Feroza on the New York Tour showing her the glamorous face of America in the form of the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, the twin World Trade Towers (destroyed by the terrorists on 11 September 2001), Lexington Avenue and various American museums. Then he acquaints her with the darker side of New York—its small, dark video parlors, cheap hotels and bars and male prostitutes and also America's poverty.

One day, moving alone she ascends a wrong elevator and reaches the twentieth floor instead of the fifteenth. A cheerful woman comes to her rescue and advises her to go down and step in the right line of the elevator. Seeing her hesitation in going down she suggests the alternative of taking the fire stairs to reach the fifteenth floor. The experience of the stairs is horrifying. She feels as if she has been cabined and cut off from the rest of the world. An old Japanese fellow helps her and chides her for such foolishness, which might lead her to any kind of mishap, including even her murder.

The three month stay ignites in her the desire of having more exposure to the American way of life and she gets admission in a college in Twin Falls, Idaho. Manek initiates her in several precautions regarding her safety in an alien land. In the college, her roommate Jo initiates her in the American way of speaking English and she starts wearing jeans and T-shirts. One day she even smokes a cigarette and looks for her *Kusti* and *sudreh* prayers begging divine forgiveness for committing the sacrilege.

Feroza meets David Press in connection with purchasing his car but hands over her heart to him and seeks permission of her parents to marry him. This horrifies the whole family, as it would excommunicate her from the Parsee community. Her mother Zareen rushes to America to realise that her daughter has really become “an American Brat”—a child who behaves very badly. (279) She accuses herself for sending Feroza to America. However, she uses the sugar-pill formula to cut the love knot and her deliberate portrayal of the Parsee rituals of marriage makes David realize that they belong to two different cultures the communion of which would not lead them to happiness. But this is only a partial victory for Zareen as her daughter refuses to go back to Pakistan. She decides to stay in America making new goals for her, which includes the possibility of meeting someone whom she might know and also love. It does not matter whether he would be a Parsee or not.

III

Sidhwa’s use of olfactory images is very effective in the novel. The cross-cultural paradigm provides her an opportunity to create contrasting images. She does succeed in giving “a sensitive portrait of how modern America appears to a new arrival and an exploration of the impact it has on her.” (Penenberg, 1994) Within three days of her arrival in the U.S., Feroza finds it difficult to assimilate herself in the new environment as the images representing reality have become vague:

Feroza, still disoriented by her sudden swing from Lahore to New York—a trajectory that appeared to have pitched her into the next century— and the ten-hour lag she had not yet adjusted to, had a surrealistic impression of blurred images: a kaleidoscope of perception in which paintings, dinosaurs, American-Indian artifacts, and Egyptian mummies mingled with hamburgers, pretzels, sapphire earrings, deodorants, and glamorous window displays. (76)

When Feroza sees the seamy side of American life, it is the smell contrast that immediately emerges in her mind :

Feroza was used to the odor of filth, the reek of poverty: sweat, urine, open drains, rotting carrion, vegetables, and the other debris that the poor in Pakistan had become inured to.

But those were smells and sights she was accustomed to and had developed a tolerance for. This was an alien fifth, a compost reeking of vomit and alcoholic belches, of neglected old age and sickness, of drugged exhalations and the malodorous ferment of other substances she could not decipher. The smells disturbed her psyche; it seemed to her they personified the callous heart of the rich country that allowed such savage neglect to occur. The fetid smell made her want to throw up. She ran out of the building, and leaving against the wall of the terminal, began to retch. (81)

When Feroza enters a wrong elevator and comes down by the fire steps, America resembles a ruthless, hollow, cylindrical shape without beginning or end, without sunlight, an unfathomable concrete tube inhabited by her fear. On the fire steps the “odor of rot was getting stronger and there was a new reek of alcohol and vomit she recognized from their evening on Eighth Avenue”. (91) Earlier, on Lexington Avenue outside Bloomindales Manek smells a *desi* smell and says, “I bet there’s an Indian or Paki in the room. One can smell a native from a mile.” (73) These *desis* do not know how to use even a deodorant. He tells Feroza that the smell emanates from her. This makes Feroza ruminates over her body odor:

How could Feroza tell him of the countless times her mother and grandmother had soaked the underarms of her garments in an ammonia solution to get rid of the odor that clung to her clothes even after they were washed? It was an odor she was accustomed to, accepted by her friends as natural to their eyes, and in summer they showered twice and sometimes thrice a day. (74)

IV

A significant dimension of the novel is its oblique commentary on religious fundamentalism. Zareen and her husband decide to send their daughter Feroza to America so that she should not be a prey to the Islamic fundamentalism dominating in Pakistan, but they themselves exhibit the same kind of Parsee fundamentalism by trying their best to stop their daughter’s marriage to a non-Parsee. Through the younger generation and later also through Zareen, the

novelist seems to suggest that Parsees should broaden the scope of their religion otherwise they would become extinct one day.

Sidhwa also touches upon the gender disparity in the Parsee community. After her stay in America for about two weeks Zareen realizes the epistemic injustice done to the Parsee women. In her eyes, it is not fair that a Parsee man can remain a Parsee even after marrying a non-Parsee but a Parsee woman does not have that privilege. Her comment is worth noting:

Till now these issues had not affected her. But with Feroza's happiness at stake and her strengthening affection for David, Zareen wondered about it. How could a religion whose prophet urged his followers to spread the Truth of his message in the holy *Gathas* – the songs of Zarathustra – prohibit conversion and through her daughter out of the faith? (287)

This is what Miranda Fricker terms as hermeneutical injustice in which women's powerlessness means that their social position is one of unequal participation and hermeneutical marginalization—“a form of powerlessness”. (152-53) Sidhwa hints at a kind of defiance to the orthodoxy prevailing over the Parsee community. Though her protagonist does not marry a non-Parsee, she keeps her options open for future. The novel ends on this note of Feroza's determination of remaining true to her own individual self. This individuation takes place not only in the young daughter but also her mother who questions such modes of power structures. It is the same kind of questioning one finds in the leading female characters in Bharati Mukherji's *Jasmine*, Boman Desai's *The Memory of Elephants*, and Shashi Deshpande's *Ships That Pass*. The protagonists and other characters attain individuation by “asking first-order ethical questions in the context of socially situated accounts of our epistemic practices”. (Fricker 3)

It is a well-known truth that a writer's environment, natural, cultural or socio-political, influences her/his creative imagination. Sidhwa makes an effective use of her exposure to the newly acquired American nationality and with *An American Brat* has made a significant contribution towards an understanding of different cultures in a fast moving multicultural world. She herself said that she wrote about America, as it was “a compulsion to define my experiences in America, and to include these in fiction”. (Sidhwa, “Writing as an Immigrant” 162). She further says in the same article that it is not easy to portray the nuances of a culture one is not born to, but she has taken the risk of getting inside the skin of a character that is shaped by another culture. Writing about the

communion of cultures she says: “This aspect is most apparent in my last novel *An American Brat* published in India by Penguin. The events, embedded as they are in their respective cultures, have immediacy and pertinence in both the Subcontinent and America. And, in handling a narrative that must be sustained in both the East and the West, it is inevitable that I compare life as I perceive it in the new world with the ways and values in the ancient world of the Subcontinent I am more accustomed to.” (Sidhwa, “Writing as an Immigrant” 163) In portraying the reality, the novelist does show her or his bias regarding the comprehension of it. Sidhwa herself says, “And, not content merely to interpret human relationships or the cosmos, the novelist also passes judgment, makes statements about her beliefs, and imposes on the unwary reader, through the dramatization of the subject, his or her own bias.” (Sidhwa, “Why do I Write?” 31) She does make a judgment, though a docile one, on the cultures of both the countries – Pakistan and America – and seems truthful to the portrayal of the mediation of cultures. The autobiographical strain is obvious in the novel. What Sidhwa herself does in accepting the American identity while maintaining her Pakistani and Parsee identities intact, is dreamt by her young protagonist Feroza for whom there is no going back but the choice remains open.

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