



Reflection of Cultural Ethos in Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*



Dr. Jeevan S. Masure

Assistant Professor and Head
Department of English
Netaji Subhashchandra Bose College,
Nanded (MS), India

Abstract :

Parsis are people who follow the religion named Zoroastrianism. They follow different practices in their religion. As a Parsi writer, she has shown her attachment to her community through her works. Her novels help to understand the socio-cultural background of Parsi community. They reflect pre- and post-colonial era of the subcontinent. Sidhwa's *An American Brat*, the fourth novel published in 1993, throws light on the cultural conflicts. It is shown with help of a central female character Feroza. The novelist has focused on the transformation of a sixteen year

old girl, Feroza. She has tackled the culture of Pakistani people, Parsi people and American people. She really becomes an American Brat by adopting the ways of Americans. The conflict enters into Parsi life when the modern generation of Parsis adopts the ways of Americans. In the present novel, it is seen that modern generation has adopted a new outlook. The modern generation thinks that it is inevitable to do the marriages outside of faith.

Keywords : Parsi community, cultural conflict, Bapsi Sidhwa, *An American Brat*

Research Paper :

Indian English Literature has occupied its own place as a significant part of the world literature in English. It has achieved a new range and power. It is only an impact of literacy in English, which has been steadily growing. Novel is considered as one of the genres of literature. It is the most powerful form of literary expression. The three Indian novelist named R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand have played an important role to begin the journey of the novel. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee published the first Indian English novel entitled 'Raj Mohan's wife' in 1864. It paved the way for *Anandmath* (1884) which is Indian's first political novel. Parsi writers have emerged as dominant writers in every field of literature. In the field of poetry, Behram Malbari, Keki Daruwall, Gieve Patel and Adil Jussawalla are the well-known names. The Parsi dramatists like Dina Mehta, Adi Mazban and Firoze Antia are celebrated writers. Bapsi Sidhwa, Dina Mehta, Nergis Dalal, Rohinton Mistry, Firdaus Kanga are the recognized names in the field of fiction writing. Meher Pestonjee, Keki Daruwalla and Cornelia Sorabji have shown their talent in short story writing. In this way, it appears that though the Parsis are considered as a minority community, they have fulfilled the needs of the reader by their skills as writers. Some of them have, indeed, done a great thing to expose their community to the readers. Therefore, it is a good thing for the readers to see the minority community of Parsis through their works.

The Parsi life style and their ways are different from other religions. Such picture of Parsi community has been highlighted through their Parsi novels by the writers. While talking about Zoroastrianism, Jivani Jamshedji Modi says, "Zoroastrianism or Parseeism by whatever name the system may be called is a monotheistic form of religion". (Modi 67) The Parsis believe in only one God. The present attempt aims to explain the culture of Parsi along with their typical traditions and customs that are represented in Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *An American Brat*. It not only brings out the perfect picture of Parsi community but also highlights its marginal status in the country.

Parsis are people who follow the religion named Zoroastrianism. They follow different practices in their religion. They carry out different religious activities. They are also known as fire worshippers. While talking about the religion, Farhang Mehr says, "In the west, the religion is most commonly called Zoroastrinism; and Zoroaster is the Greek rendering of Zarathushtra." (Mehr 02) It is considered that *Avesta* is their sacred scripture. It contains five parts named Vispred, Yasht, Vedidad, and Khordeh Avesta. Ahura Mazda represents the Lord. Ahura stems from the root *Ah*, it means 'to be or to exist'. And Mazda from Mana, it means wisdom and intelligence. Parsi people believe in Ahura Mazda. Like this, they do different activities according to their religion.

Bapsi Sidhwa is a well-known Pakistani writer. She is a celebrated Parsi writer who has contributed a lot for commonwealth fiction. She was born in 1938 and grew up in Lahore. In her childhood, she was the victim of Polio. So, she spent her time with the servants. Owing to this, she had to undergo some operations. She, therefore, did not attend the school. There was a tutor for her in her house to teach. She was the only child for her parents. She also experienced isolation in her life. The tutor has played an important role in the life of Bapsi Sidhwa. Apart from her writing business, she is also a social worker. She is fighting for the rights of women and their upliftment. She has also brought out the short stories and articles in various anthologies. She also performed the duties of teaching in the University of Columbia, Rice and Texas. As a Parsi writer, she has shown her attachment to her community through her works. Her novels are translated into many languages. Her status, as a writer, can easily be understood through her novels. For her novel *Ice Candy Man* she received the Liberaturepres is Award from Germany in 1991. She also received another prestigious award named Sitara-I-Imtiaz from Pakistan in 1991. This award is given as a National Honour in the field of arts. Through her novels *The Crow Eaters*, *The Bride*, *Cracking India*, *An American Brat* and *Water*, she has depicted the picture of Pakistani roots to introduce Parsi community to the readers. Her novels are helpful to understand the socio-cultural background of Parsi community. Her novels reflect pre-and post-colonial era of the subcontinent. The terrific experience of partition is also reflected through her novels.

Sidhwa's *An American Brat* is the fourth novel published in 1993. It throws light on the cultural conflicts. The central character, Feroza, plays an important role in the novel to develop the plot of the novel. The novelist has focused on the transformation of a sixteen year old girl. She has tackled the culture of Pakistani people, Parsi people and American people. The girl, who was timid at the very beginning, becomes free to take her own decisions without having any restrictions. The themes of partition and marriage have been developed by the writer through this novel. The novel has got some funny elements which make the novel interesting to read. At the end of the novel, it is shown that the protagonist of the novel becomes 'an American Brat' by becoming independent to do whatever she likes. Her journey, from Lahore to America, makes her confident and independent as the novelist reveals.

The modern generation of Parsi community adopts the ways of Americans. The people like Feroza and David do not get married, but they focus on the institution of marriage. Feroza is a timid girl as she hesitates to answer on telephone. It is seen at the very beginning of the novel. But at the end, she is introduced to be free, self-confident and an independent. The transformation of her character is an ingredient part of the novel. With the help of many characters through the novel, she really becomes an American Brat by adopting the ways of Americans. Jo, the room-mate and classmate of Feroza, also proves to be helpful to Feroza to teach American ways. Feroza meets her at Twin Falls. Feroza has joined Daho College. As Jo is introduced to Feroza by the counselor, Manek tells her that she will teach her American ways. Mr. Miller is the father of Jo. Her mother is a compulsive gambler. She has two sisters, Janine and Sally.

Feroza decides to marry a man who does not belong to her community. She also does not hesitate to say that she is not allowed to enter into Fire Temple in Karachi. She dares to go into one of the Fire Temples of Mumbai where people will not recognize her. By presenting the character Feroza, Bapsi Sidhwa is trying to depict the modern generation of Parsi community. The modern generation of their community is not so keen to follow their religion. While commenting on the novel, Lata Rengachari states,

"*An American Brat* talks specifically of the woman in exile and celebrates the better understanding of oneself and one's culture that distance and exile offer." (Rengachari, 57)

Feroza says, 'I am going to America, I'm going to America. (27) Feroza is in America because of her mother Zareen. To depict it Jyoti Yadav states,

"The conflict between the anxiety to preserve the ethnic identity and the need to adapt oneself to the other cultures is revealed in the novel through the decision of Zareen to send her daughter Feroza to America." (Yadav 84-85)

Bapsi Sidhwa has created a wonderful character like Feroza, who realizes herself at last and free to have the way for her life. Matrimonial ceremonies are done in association with the religion. Feroza's break up with David Press is a matter of cultural conflict. The different religions of both of them differ. Therefore, it can be understood that the religion matters. Manek assures her parents that he will be at Kennedy Airport to receive her. One hundred American dollars have been given by Cyrus to her daughter.

David Press is actually a good guy. He is genius. He has the temperament of a saint. He looks like a nice boy for Zareen. He shows many Places to Zareen. Sometimes, she finds David as suitable son-in-law. But, there is religion which does not permit her to allow her daughter to marry with him. She thinks about the rigid code of her religion. If the Parsi boy gets married with a non-Parsi girl, it is accepted. But it is not accepted when a girl gets married with a non-Parsi boy. She will be thrown away from their community. She is not allowed to perform the rituals of their community as well. When Zareen asks David whether he will come to get married with his family members, David shows his disinterest and remains unenthusiastic. She tries to describe the Parsi wedding to David. He is angry sometimes. He tells her that he is a Jew and he has some customs in his religion to follow. He says that his family will miss his getting married under a canopy by their rabbi. They have a great dinner including cake and fruit. There is an old tradition they also follow like Parsi religion after the discussion, the change in his behavior is seen in the course of time. He has started to call her ZAP. It means that Zoroastrian American Princess. He also calls her 'an apple of mommy's eye'. Feroza turns her offended face and stares resentfully. The feelings of David for Feroza have undergone a change. In this way, their relationship has been broken. Zareen also leaves for Pakistan.

The arranged marriage between Manek and Aban helps to throw light on traditional marriage ceremony amongst Parsi community. Manek is presented as a complex personality. He is twenty-two years old. He is studying Chemical Engineering at MIT. He is a young and intelligent guy. He is getting valuable education. He got Ph.D. His work on his thesis in chemical and structural engineering is good and appreciated by the professor. Their recommendations were excellent. He got a job at NASA. He is also settled in America. He has no wish to return to Pakistan. He is mature and sensible. He has bad experiences of selling Bibles, staying with Patel family in Atlanta, the fracture that he managed on his own. Such bitter experiences, he has learnt these things. He has also helped Feroza to learn the ways of America. He is a successful man in America, but he is unable to be free from the inferiority complex he is challenged by the gora-complex. He marries with Aban a Pakistani Parsee girl because he does not want to have demanding or assertive American wife. It would harm his male ego. He is also a representative of modern generation. He is not shocked when he learns the decision of Feroza. He is wise enough to understand that it is natural for her to be in love as she has spent her four years in America. He asks her to give some time to their relationship. He also informs Zareen that the romance between Feroza and David will come to an end automatically. Manek has become a true American by adopting the principles of American people. He shows his dominance over towards wife. Aban is a perfect representative of traditional Parsi wife. She is not assertive, but submissive. She faces aloofness in her life. She longs to meet her parents, but it proves impossible for her as she is in America.

Bapsi Sidhwa, as a member of Parsi community, tries to sprinkle the Parsi colours through the novel, *An American Brat*. This novel is indeed, a Parsi novel which the writer has driven the readers to comprehend the Parsi community. The elements of Parsi community can be easily observed throughout the novel. Gujarati is the mother tongue of Parsee people. Zarathustra is the founder of Parsi religion. The principles and values follow the Parsee people laid down by him. In the novel, there are some references of Zarathustra. In the house of Cyrus and Zareen, the portrait of Zarathustra is seen. Zareen is seen to say Zoroastrian prayers she invokes Sarosh Ejud. He is an angle of success. It is supposed that she protects mankind with effective weapons. The writer depicts Zareen as she is not a proper Pakistani woman as she is not Muslim. The writer describes that she was in the land of seven rivers, the Septe Sindu. It was the land where prophet Zarathustra declared as favoured most by Ahura Mazda. The religion named Zoroastrianism is followed by Parsee religion. Zarathustra has occupied a greatest place in their day today life.

Mixed marriages are prohibited in Parsi community. The family members of Feroza get a shock when they learn that she is going to marry an American Jew, David Press. Her family members insist Zareen to pursue the mind of Feroza. She, therefore, goes to the States to do something. She is also not happy with the decision of her daughter. When she meets David, she finds some good qualities in him and

wishes him to be a Parsi young man. She is not happy to learn the rigid code of her community. At this juncture, she tries to change the mind of Feroza. She is afraid that if Feroza gets married with a non-Parsi, she will be ex-communicated from her community. She also thinks about injustice, which she is doing to her daughter. She is trying to restrict her. To describe this issue, Seema R. Gida states:

“Feroza’s conservative mother Zareen ironically realizes by denying her daughter’s freedom of choice in marriage, she is doing a great injustice to her” (Gida 82).

Zareen thinks about her daughter’s future as a careful and dear mother. She knows the customs of her community. The novelist has given the example of two victims. There were two girls named Perin Powri and Roda Kapakia who become the victims. In the present novel, it is seen that modern generation has adopted a new outlook. The modern generation thinks that it is inevitable to do such marriages. The granddaughters and the grandsons of Khultibai have accepted modern views. But, Khultiabi dislikes the modern views as she is the representative of traditional Parsi women. However, it is seen that Parsee uses Gujrati as their mother tongue. Parsi people also make the use of English language to express their emotions. They follow the principles of Zarathustra. They give importance to Sudreh and Kusti to wear. They visit the fire temples on special occasions. The Parsi people also celebrate farewell ceremony having its special importance. Mixed marriages are not allowed in their community, but the trend to marry out of their religion is going on. Parsees maintain their wedding ceremony distinctly. They introduce their different appearance. In their religion, they make use of the Tower of Silence to diminish the corpses. But, in the course of time due to the lack of vultures their bodies are buried. All these things keep their religion different from others. The Parsi culture, in this post-modern era, remains as sacred and distinct as it was in ancient.

Works Cited :

- Sidhwa, Bapsi. *An American Brat*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1994. Print. (All parenthetical references are from this edition).
- Dodiya, Jaydipsingh. *Parsi English Novel*. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2006 Print.
- Faiyaz, Afreen. *Thematic Concerns in the Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa: A Treatise*. Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2012 Print.
- Gida, Seema R. *Women in the Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa and Namita Gokhale: A Critical Study*. Diss. “Saurashtra University, 2006. Print.
- <http://etheses.saurashtrauniversity.edu/id/830/>
- Mehr, Farhang. *The Zoroastrian Tradition: An Introduction to the Ancient Wisdom of Zorathushtra*. California: Mazda Publishers, 2003. Print.
- Modi, Jamshedji “The Religious System of the Parsee” *Socio-Religious System of the Parsis*. Ed. J. B. Sharma and S.P. Sharma. Jaipur: Sublime Publications, 1999. Print.
- Rengachari, Lata. “The Subcontinental Expatriate Woman’s Novel as a Melting Pot for History and Politics: A Study of Bapsi Sidhwa’s *An American Brat*.” *Parsi Fiction* Ed. Novy Kapadia, Jaydipsingh Dodiya and R.K. Dhawan New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2001. 56-71. Print.
- Yadav, Jyoti. *Ethnic Anxiety and Cultural Adaptability: A Critical Study of Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry*. New Delhi: Creative Books, 2011. Print.