

Representation of Feminism in South Asian Society: A Critical Study of An American Brat by Bapsi Sidhwa

Hamza Hassan¹ & Muhammad Rizwan²

¹PhD Candidate in Cinematography,
Faculty of Applied & Creative Arts, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak,
Kota Samarahan, Kuching, Malaysia

²Visiting Lecturer, Islamia University, Bahawalpur
Email: hamzaofficial2000@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

An American Brat by Bapsi Sidhwa is a postcolonial and feminist novel. Feroza, the heroine of the novel, is a teenage Parsee girl from Lahore. The novel An American Brat is focused on the character of Feroza because she was sent to America to her uncle. There, her behaviour changed. The whole story revolved around this single character. The parents of Feroza are very modern, while Feroza is a religious and conservative girl when we are introduced to her character. She is never attracted to the young men because she is regarded as backward and narrow-minded. She is an innocent individual and loves to stay alone. Firstly, she was not ready to go to America, but her family made her go there forcefully. The modern world of America proved awful for the sixteen years old Feroza. Therefore the consequences were as appalling as expected. This is why the feminist approach can be traced in the novel's text either from her mother or from herself. Feminism as the dominant approach is waved throughout the novel in one way or the other. This research is conducted to draw out all feminist traces from the text.

Keywords: *Feminism, Postcolonialism, Fiction, South Asian Literature, Pakistani English Literature.*

1. Introduction

The term "feminism" refers to the study of women's issues in all societies. It encompasses a variety of social, political, and ideological movements that seek to define the economic, personal, social, and political qualities of genders (Ritzer & Ryan, 2010). Women's status in society and how they are treated within it are other topics covered by feminism. Additionally, it ensures that men and women have equal access to all professional and educational institutions. Additionally, feminist movements fought for women's rights to own property, get an education, make contracts, be treated equally in marriage, hold public office, work, earn fair earnings, equal compensation, and have access to paid maternity leave. Additionally, this hypothesis was discussed to shield women and girls from domestic abuse and sexual assault (Echols, 1989).

Pakistani author Bapsi Sidhwa is a Parsee (Zoroastrian). She was born in Karachi, a populous area and relocated to the United States of America in 1980. She has only written one book set in the US, An American Brat. Her novels tend to take a feminist stance. Her fourth book, An American Brat, centres on the lives of a young Parsi girl growing up in America while dealing

with patriarchal and religious standards related to women's issues. She looked at the parallels and differences between American and Pakistani civilizations. She also draws attention to the political issues that young people experience psychological issues.

Feroza is the protagonist of this novel where she is named as “An American Brat”. All of the novel's story is focused on her life while all other characters and incidents are linked to her character. She belongs to a Parsee family and is a religious girl. She wears scarves, being conservative, sensible-backwards and narrow-minded. She is not attracted to young men and has her world of limitations. Her mother is concerned about her behaviour. In the society of Pakistan, religion and morality are unquestionable institutions. There is no compromise on religion or moral values.

Manek is the uncle of Feroza, only six years older than Feroza. Their relationship is like siblings, rather than as uncle and niece. They are considered babies and envious of each other, but in the United States, they are very supportive of one another. He called Feroza the nickname “boochinai” while Feroza called him “guardian”. Manek is a doctoral student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he guides Feroza about using deodorant and how to tear open plastic wrappers. He also supports her in getting out of her covered existence to be an independent girl. Firstly, Feroza joins a college in Idaho and then she goes to Colorado. She learns about American culture and manners from her roommates and classmates; Jo, Gwen, Shahi, the Indian boyfriend of Feroza and David Press.

David possesses a refined demeanour; A young man of great beauty. Feroza becomes attracted to him after being impressed by his charisma. She deteriorates with time and ends up corrupt. She and David begin to interact physically. When she wishes to marry an American Jew, her whole family turns against him. Then she realizes how deep she has gone in her relationship but her family bitterly resists her decision, telling her that if she married a Jew, she would lose her creed and faith. Feroza argued that in case a man married a woman of any other culture or religion, his faith had no harm, but in the case of a woman, it is badly criticized.

Although it was not her fault, her family forced her to be independent and modern. She had refused to visit the United States, but her parents persuaded her to go nonetheless. Zareen was astounded at the book's conclusion that Feroza shared a home with a guy and a couple of lesbians, while Lura and Shirley had a lesbian relationship.

2. Literature Review

The term "feminism" was originally used in 1837 by French philosopher and utopian socialist Charles Fourier (Goldstein, 1982). The terms "feminisme" and "feministe" originally appeared in the French and Dutch in 1872. Later it came to Great Britain in 1890, while in 1910, it was introduced in the United States (Offen, 1987). According to Nancy Chodorow, "feminist theory, which emerged from the feminist movement, aims to understand the nature of gender inequality by examining women's social roles and lived experience; it had developed theories in a variety of disciplines in order to respond to issues concerning gender (Chodorow, 1989)." According to the famous scholar Chris Weedon, "The number of movements and ideologies has developed over the years and represent different viewpoints and aims. Some forms of feminism have been criticized for discussing only the white, middle class and college-educated perspectives. This criticism led to the creation of ethnically specific or multicultural forms of feminism, including black feminism and intersectional feminism (Weedon, 2002)." According to Sara Ahmed, "Black and Postcolonial Feminisms pose a challenge to some of the organizational principles of Western Feminist Thought" (Ahmed, 2000) is how she describes Black and Postcolonial Feminism. Regarding the cultural movement, Riot Grrrls adopted an anti-corporate stance of independence and self-reliance. Riot Grrrls placed a significant emphasis on the idea of a universal female identity and separatism, which frequently seems to be more closely linked to second-wave feminism than third wave feminism. The movement supported and prioritized "adolescent girls' viewpoints," enabling them to completely express themselves (Code, 2004).

Bapsi Sidhwa is recognized internationally as the first Pakistani English writer. Most of her novels are themed on women's issues with a focus on the society of South Asia. An American Brat is her fourth novel which focuses on the life of a young Parsee girl, Feroza, leading life in the United States. Mostly, she addresses the religious and male chauvinistic problems faced by the women of South Asian society. The main character of An American Brat is Feroza Ginwalla. She is a 16-years-old Pakistani girl whom her parents sent to America due to the political anarchy in Pakistan. A few months later, supported by her uncle, her rigid thinking of Feroza softened and American culture and independence enchanted her. Now she insisted on living there. There was already an agreement that she would return to her country after completing her education. As a student living in a small town of the States, her perceptions about United States and her homeland began to change. The end of the novel shows feminism, and feminism remained the dominant theme in the whole novel. Sidhwa successfully defines

the American experience, first by the views of Feroza, and then as her mother's reactions, which is a feminist approach of a Pakistani society which every girl here faces.

According to G. Sheela and Dr. K. Muthuraman, research scholars of PhD at Annamalai University, "It is the story of Americanization of a young Parsee girl. Sidhwa narrated it based on her own experience when she shifted to the modern United States from a conservative Pakistani society. According to Suman Bala's observation:, "In An American Brat Sidhwa highlights the sensitive issue of inter-community marriage between a Parsi and a non-Parsi. An American Brat demonstrates what a stronghold tradition has and the agony of breaking with established norms. It also shows how bewildering it is for migrant communities to adapt to the changes. Bapsi Sidhwa's semi-autobiographical novel pokes good-natured fun at both the conservative Parsi life in Pakistan and free-wheeling chaos of modernized American life by Feroza. She undertakes a journey from a tradition-bound culture into the depths of an alien culture in an effort to adapt and assimilate independence and strength of character and decision-making, declined to her in her own culture (G.Sheela, 2013)." In this connection, another writer, Mr M. Sheikh, wrote his view this way:

There are some passages which are interesting in this journey, where Feroza erects to American norms, standards, landscapes and so on, given her particular cultural and social background, upbringing and experiences. The strongest parts of this novel are when through her character, Sidhwa appreciates different types in the East and in the West (Sheikh, 2008).

Bhaskar Pandya reviews the novel as, "Rather astonishingly, on the other hand, the mother of Feroza, Zareen is very pleased. She is imagining The United States as the land of colourful magazines, Rock Stars and Jeans. Feroza is advised to keep away from the strangers and never to trust anyone. She follows all instructions and acts appropriately, but as she lands at Kennedy Airport, she suddenly feels a lot freer. Her surprise at the orderly traffic is increased by the blazing lights and enormous structures. However, she had a pretty horrible encounter with the passport officer. A pleased young man gladly fulfils her request. She finally loads her bags onto her cart (Pandya, 2013).

Sana Imtiaz asserts that Bapsi Sidhwa's work An American Brat is important since it exposes several women's identity problems in contrast to the traditional gender roles of women in Pakistan. Humorously, this book illustrates the idea of a woman's fixed identity while highlighting the valence of representations. Importantly, the study examines the reaction of the underrepresented audiences while analyzing these varied feminist representations. This article

concludes that Sidhwa has shown the many-colored depictions of women in South Asian society by employing the Pessar and Mahler (2003) paradigm (Imtiaz & Asif, 2011).

According to previous research on *An American Brat*, Sidhwa highlights the fixed identity of a woman in Pakistani society and the problems of a woman in different cultures. Sidhwa also provides a glimpse of her current political condition in Pakistan and its effect on an innocent girl. Sidhwa unfolds the social, mental, cultural and psychological conflicts of how conformist Pakistani girl Feroza changes after her travel to the United States. She describes how Feroza leaves her culture and adopts new manners in an alien American culture. When societal standards trump the desire for self-recognition, it highlights the crisis of self-recognition. She also discusses religion and the inter-community union of a Parsee and a non-Parsee, and every theme in the book takes a feminist stance.

3. Research Methodology

For this study, the researchers will be using qualitative tools of research. The novel's text will be the main data source, and according to the given topic, the researchers will apply the critical and literary theory of feminism. The supplied text will be analyzed using a feminist lens to identify the author's feminist viewpoint. To produce the best findings, the researchers will critically interpret the text. The researchers will highlight the sentences or paragraphs that best reflect the author's feminist perspective in the given material.

4. Data Analysis

Zareen, Feroza Ginwalla's mother, sent her to the United States to see her uncle Manek. The heroine of the story is Feroza, a teenage protagonist. In Pakistan under General Zia in the late 1970s, Zareen wants to dissuade Feroza from the hard-line Islamic society. She thinks her daughter's conservatism will lessen after a trip to the United States. The novel's plot revolves around her, and all the other characters are connected to her.

The protagonist of the novel and some other characters are related to feminism. Feroza is a very conservative girl when we are introduced to her character. Zareen, her mother, views her daughter as:

"She won't even answer the phone anymore!' What if it's some-one 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!" (Sidhwa, 2012)

The first chapter begins with the name of a female character, "Zareen Ginwala," which highlights the significance of women in the book and how feminism is related. It also demonstrates the common concern that parents have for their daughters:

“I’m really worried about Feroza” (Sidhwa, 2012).

Zareen believes that their daughter is falling behind in school daily due to various factors, including attending a school where her religious beliefs are opposed to theirs. Her mother is quite concerned about her because she is becoming attached to that environment;

“She’s becoming more and more backward every day”. (Sidhwa, 2012).

Zareen always wore high heels because her height was short, and she wanted equality with her husband;

“She always wore high heels, to measure up to her husband,” (Sidhwa, 2012)

Feroza is religious-minded; therefore, she does not like her mother's dressing when she goes to fetch her from her school. Her mother, Zareen Ginwala is a modern lady; mostly, she wears sleeveless blouses while being religious-minded, Feroza wears scarves. In the car, she said:

“Mummy, please don't come to the 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, everybody knows we dress differently” (Sidhwa, 2012).

Here Cyrus puts objections on freedom of women in their society by saying that women mustn't show their legs, they mustn't play hockey because the society, they are living in, is a Muslim society and Muslims do not like such things in their society;

Women mustn't show their legs, women shouldn't dress like that, and women shouldn't act like that. Girls mustn't play hockey or sing or dance! If everything corrupts their pious little minds so easily, then the mullahs should wear burqas and stay within the four walls of their houses (Sidhwa, 2012)

Zareen criticizes the society that in those days, Bhutto was going to be Prime Minister because he was a man. Therefore she thinks if she were a man, she would also be the Prime Minister;

“For the first time I felt, it didn't matter that I was not a Muslim, or that I was a woman.” (Sidhwa, 2012)

In these lines, Zareen is talking about feminist rights because in General Zia's era, Bhutto was demanding women's rights, and Zareen's Ayah and sweepers were also talking about women's rights that what are these?

“Even Ayah and the sweeper's wife asked, ‘what are these women's rights’” (Sidhwa, 2012)

Here Zareen is talking about the wives sustained on juices, sodas and soup but served their husbands gratefully. Same as Zareen was also acting like that with her husband.

“The resentful wives sustained themselves on juices, sodas, and soup until then. Like Zareen, they felt they were forced to caper their men on an endless round of evening binges.” (Sidhwa, 2012)

To Cyrus, there was no importance of Zareen's talking and his behaviour shows that;

“I thought we were talking about Feroza,” Cyrus said mildly directing his wife to less hazardous ground” (Sidhwa, 2012)

Here, Zareen compares herself with her husband Cyrus in a bold motion that if it is okay for him to get drunk every evening, she must not wear sleeveless? Her voice was like an angry bee. There is a huge difference between both the mother and the daughter. Zareen is a social woman, and she loves to attend many parties.

“It's okay for you to run round getting drunk every evening, but I must stop wearing sleeveless blouses” (Sidhwa, 2012)

In these lines, in reaction to Cyrus, Zareen criticized him for his sister's shirt is more short and half rather than hers.

“I know you think my sari-blouses are short, but they're not half as short as your sister's cholis. At least I don't run around flashing my belly button” (Sidhwa, 2012)

In very hard manners, Zareen mentioned to her mother and grandmother that she'll be dressed like they dressed because the culture in which she was living was different to her religious culture;

“I'll dress the way my mother dresses, and I'll dress the way my grandmothers dressed! And no one ever called the Junglewalla women indecent!” (Sidhwa, 2012)

Feroza Ginwalla is a traditional and old-fashioned girl therefore; her mother wanted her to change into a modern lady. She is a shy and silly girl who denies attending a phone call. She also refuses to act in a play;

“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.” (Sidhwa, 2012)

Here Cyrus is more careful about his daughter because he knows how boys talked about girls by remembering his old youth days. Zareen is not aware of this because she is a woman;

“Zareen did not know the way the men talked about women. He remembered how the boys at Saint Anthony’s, his old school, and later at the Hailey College of Commerce had talked about bold girls who acted in Government College plays” (Sidhwa, 2012)

Zareen is confident about her daughter that if she acts in the play, she will come out of the play, and when the time comes, she will be able to marry a perfect Parsee boy;

But in her sudden crusade to champion “forwardness,” Zareen might be complacent about Feroza’s taking part in a play, believing their daughter would come out of the experience unscathed to marry a suitable Parsee boy at the proper time. (Sidhwa, 2012)

These are a few stances from the novel, but they are major proofs that the novel is purely feminine. Bapsi Sidhwa tries her best to show the power of women and their independence; this novel is one of the best examples of feminism.

5. Conclusion

The conclusion is that the book "An American Brat" covers a wide range of feminism-related topics. This subject has been the focus of numerous studies from various angles. Three of them were chosen to serve as the basis for this study article's application of the feminism theory: Feroza's criticism of her mother, the impact of Pakistani culture, and third, the external factors that prompt Feroza's criticism. In a Pakistani society, moral principles and religion are indisputable. Due to her religious requirements, Feroza was unable to have the wedding she wanted. David's parents may allow him to wed someone who is not of their faith, but Zareen is horrified by her daughter's choice since, in her opinion, Feroza would thereby lose her faith. Women in Pakistani society are largely physically and mentally dependent on men, in addition

to being economically dependent. The cross-cultural influences on Feroza may also be seen in how she developed into an obsessed, experienced, independent, powerful, and secular woman.

Works Cited:

- Ahmed, S. (2000). *Transformations: Thinking Through Feminism*. London: Routledge.
- Chodorow, N. (1989). *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory*. Yale : Yale University Press.
- Code, L. (2004). *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories*. London: Routledge.
- Echols, A. (1989). *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- G.Sheela, D. (2013). Conservative East Versus Modernized West: A Study of Bapsi Sidhwa. *Asia Pacific Journal of Research*, 17.
- Goldstein, L. F. (1982). Early Feminist Themes in French Utopian Socialism: The St.-Simonians and Fourier. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 91-108.
- Imtiaz, S., & Asif, P. D. (2011). “Speaking in Tongues”: Conceptualizing Femininities in Sidhwa’s *An American Brat*. *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*, 99.
- Ms. Sana Imtiaz, P. D. (2011). “Speaking in Tongues”: Conceptualizing Femininities in Sidhwa’s *An American Brat*. *American International Journal of Contemporary Research* , 99.
- Offen, K. (1987). Sur l'origine des mots « féminisme » et « féministe. *Revue d’Histoire Moderne & Contemporaine*, 492-496.
- Pandya, B. (2013). Nativism, Rootlessness, Ethnic Anxiety and Culture. *ELT Voices – India*, 23-24.
- Ritzer, G., & Ryan, J. M. (2010). *The Concise Encyclopedia of Sociology*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Sheikh, M. (2008). Review of Sidhwa's 'An American Brat. DesiLit Daily.

Sidhwa, B. (2012). An American Brat. USA: Milkweed Editions.

Weedon, C. (2002). Key Issues in Postcolonial Feminism: A Western Perspective. Gender Forum , 1-5.