

ISSN 09776-8165

Bi-Monthly, Refereed, and Indexed Open Access eJournal

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English



Vol. 8, Issue- IV (August 2017)
UGC Approved Journal No 768

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Negotiating Diasporic Sensibility in Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*

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Article History: Submitted-03/07/2017, Revised-16/08/2017, Accepted-21/08/2017, Published-10/09/2017.

Abstract:

Parsi novels give emphasis on the issues of expatriate as the writers experience it through their migration to one nation to another. The bitter experiences of dislocation and facing identity crisis in an alien nation lead a person to loneliness, anxieties, and struggle for existence. Postcolonial Parsi writers attempt to create their own literary voices in the sphere of English literature and bring up a wide range of themes, each of which deals with the diasporic experiences. The phenomenon of colonialism has had a major influence in shaping the lives of three-quarters of the people living in the world. The influence extends not just to the political and economic spheres but to the cultural as well. The Indian Diaspora began during the colonial period when the British Empire had spread its tentacles round the globe and the red stain of imperialism had leaked into diverse land masses.

Keywords: Diaspora, Parsi, Feminist, Nostalgia, Customs, Immigration.

Among the diasporic group of Indian writers there are some like Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry who have to grapple with not just one diasporic displacement but multiple displacements. A Parsi Zoroastrian, Mistry immigrated to Canada from Bombay, but in racial terms this was not his first diasporic experience. The fact remains that not just Parsis but other minorities also often experience an unease today in the supposedly secular spaces of India. This feeling of unease has realized itself in the move to the West, first to the UK, then to Canada and the USA and more recently to Australia and New Zealand. These ethnic enclosures notwithstanding the Parsis are an assimilative people who have over the centuries perfected the difficult art of being both global and local at one and the same time - something the rest of the world is beginning to talk about only very recently. Indian labourers and then entrepreneurs followed the Union Jack from the Caribbean islands to Fiji and from Canada to South Africa. Apart from their political and socio-economic importance, the diasporic Indian have been performing another important role - they have been imaging India to the world. The earlier generation of diasporic Indian writers included men like V.S. Naipaul, the Nobel Laureate, who has had and continues to have a rather stormy relationship with the land of his ancestors. The more recent among the Indian writers in diaspora are Salman Rushdie, M.G. Vassanji, Bharati Mukherjee and Rohinton Mistry among many others. They too are alternately lauded and reviled in their ancestral homeland.

In fact, distance, temporal and geographic, often lends these works an important insider-outsider perspective on India - a perspective of value within as well as outside India. These aspects of the creative expressions of the Indian diaspora have to be negotiated by Indians as their dispersed selves find greater and greater visibility globally and now official recognition within India itself. The impact is perhaps best expressed by the art and literature produced in the erstwhile colonies. Bill Ashcroft et al in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) uses the term postcolonial to "cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (*The Empire Writes Back* 2). Bapsi Sidhwa belongs to India, Pakistan and the United States simultaneously but she likes herself to be described as a "Punjabi-Pakistani- Parsi woman". She picks up some significant incidents from her own life or from the lives of other people and fleshes them out to create a larger reality of fiction. The western feminist literature has influenced her greatly but she does not see herself as a writer writing for women.

In *An American Brat*, the Zoroastrian worldview operates explicitly. The heightened consciousness of Feroza is the outcome of expatriation. Since only the New World ensures happiness coupled with freedom, she opts for it. Though there is a change in the external mode, her inner self remains typically Zoroastrian. Thus her survival in the new habitat is due to her success in preserving her ethnic identity. Both Freddie and Feroza are typical migrants who practice the values of charity and adaptability. While Freddie makes charity the cornerstone of his existence in Lahore, Feroza takes the idea of adaptability to the point of consummation. Thus for both, the chosen land (Lahore or America) provides adequate social space to grow and attain prosperity and success whereas Zoroastrianism continues to provide enough emotional and religious space.

Of course, the protagonists of Bapsi Sidhwa are mainly women and they invariably win against men in their struggle for survival and honour. Jerbanoo outlives her tormentor, Faredoon Junglewalla. Zaitoon manages to save her life despite the looming threat. Ayah is liberated from the Hira Mandi and sent back to her family in Amritsar. Feroza in spite of enormous pressure of her back home family to return to Lahore and her failure in her first love, decides to settle in America. Thus, Sidhwa's women are strong-willed, assertive and courageous. They resolve their crises in their own way. Though men in her novels are finally humiliated or rejected, Sidhwa is never anti-male. Sidhwa adds a new dimension to the feminist perspective by pointing out that women may be harassed and exploited not only by men but also by other women. Sidhwa never preaches about feminism as such but the events in her novels speak a lot about it. Ethnicity is Sidhwa's forte. Sidhwa's diction also reflects ethnic qualities. Her English is, however, bilingual like that of the most of the South Asian writers. She has laced her English with Gujarati and Urdu words and phrases. The native words and expressions not only make her language sound as everyday speech in the subcontinent but also contribute to its originality, charm and freshness. Thus, racial, regional, national and cultural issues of historical as well as topical significance form the core of her novels.

Living in diaspora means living in forced or voluntary exile and living in exile usually leads to severe identity confusion and problems of identification with and alienation from the old and new cultures and homelands. Therefore, we find most diasporic writing suffused with identity consciousness and the continuing problems of living in alien societies. As Salman Rushdie has put in *Imaginary Homelands*, the position of the 'exile or immigrant' is one of 'profound uncertainties'. The diasporic person is at home neither in the West nor in India and is thus 'unhomed' in the most essential sense of the term. However, as Homi Bhabha has pointed out in *The Location of Culture*, to be 'unhomed is not to be homeless'. When the realization of being unhomed first strikes one 'the world shrinks and then it expands enormously. The unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalence of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence. This relation of personal and psychic trauma to the disjunctions of political existence is clearly evident in the work of Rohinton Mistry.

The preferred term used here to describe the Indian writer who lives outside India is 'diasporic' - the term related to the ancient Jewish diaspora - as it given the proper sense of dispersment, loss, and nostalgia and is thus more evocative than the terms exile or expatriate. However, as Vijay Mishra has pointed out in his essay "The diasporic imaginary: theorizing the Indian diaspora" (*Textual Practice*, X. 3. 1996) the Indian diaspora lacks several important parameters of the Jewish diaspora. The most important one being the searing desire to return to the homeland. There is little of that evident in the Indian diaspora. Bapsi Sidhwa has a distinctive Pakistani yet Parsi ethos in her writings but above all a unique individual voice. It is this individualism and sense of humour which makes her one of the finest comic writers in the genre of sub continental English fiction. Monolithic national categories do not apply to Sidhwa who insists on seeing herself as a Pakistani, with an answer awareness of a Western audience.

Her fourth and latest novel *An American Brat* (published in 1994) moves its locale, for the most part, to the New World, the United States of America. Her novel reflects the recent trend of globalization, the concept of the world as a global village and increasing movement of professionals ('brain drain') from the Third World to First World nations like the USA, England, Australia and Canada. As people move from one part of the world to another, national boundaries dissolve, the formation and maintenance of community takes on new dimensions. This novel reveals all Bapsi Sidhwa's major qualities as a writer, her rich comic power, keen observation, heightened sense of story and character and her moral vision of her community. The storyline is simple. Feroza Ginwalla the rebellious daughter of Cyrus and Zareen Ginwalla makes the transition from Gulberg, Lahore to Denver, Colorado with a mixture of frustrations, anger and humour. Sidhwa is at her best as she humorously delineates Feroza adapting to an alien culture and the stress that accrues when colliding cultures clash. Sidhwa's humour is both situational and a result of astute characterization. There are situations, when the nuances of language, the usage of Americanisms which Feroza is unable to fathom, cause humorous misunderstandings. It is Jo, her room-mate who teaches Feroza various Americanisms, so that she does not feel a misfit. Slowly Feroza loses her inhibitions

and in the process discovers herself. At the end of the book, Feroza finds that she has outgrown the confines and limitations of her secluded, sheltered life in Lahore. She has developed an independent mind and is willing to chalk out her own career, instead of being guided by solicitous advice from parents and elders.

An American Brat is a diasporic fiction that takes up the socio-political issues of contemporary Asian people, interwoven history and politics parallel in its fictional narrative. The theme of migration and re-adjustment are the major theme of Sidhwa's novel which also become the theme of *An American Brat*. Bapsi Sidhwa hails from the Parsi Zoroastrian sect, an ethno-religious minority whose ancestors, in the 7th century A.D. left Iran for South Asia in order to save their dignity and avoid religious persecution. Her novels are the best narratives comprise the vivid accounts of the Parsi psyche, social behaviour, moral codes, customs and cultural systems. Despite including lengthy description of Parsi rituals and gatherings, her novels never degenerate into bare sociological documentations. She takes interest to present the socio-historical facts of her community life, and unfolds serious issues with a satirical style and lampoon, appropriately recreating the Parsi milieu. She records the changing attitudes of the new and old generation about the submersion of their identity with an ironical tone.

An ironic situation puts the narrative into motion, when Zareen fears that her daughter Feroza is succumbing to the influence of Islamic fundamentalism, which is sweeping Pakistan. For one thing, Feroza has criticized her mother for dressing immodestly. Against the wishes of the family, Zareen decides to send Feroza for a visit to the United States, where she will be under the supervision of her uncle. But once she has tasted the freedom of America, Feroza is unwilling to return to Pakistan—fully cured of her flirtation with fundamentalism. Although her early experiences in the new country include an ugly bout with a US immigration Officer and a confrontation with violence in a hotel stairway, Feroza soon adjusts to the new community and decides to attend college in Idaho. Later, in Denver, she commits the unspeakable act of becoming involved with a man outside the Parsi community. At this point, Zareen arrives on the scene to persuade her daughter to come home and to bribe the Jewish boyfriend if necessary.

Such a course of events provides Sidhwa with opportunities to write about the United States from her own perspective as a Pakistani immigrant. The outward differences that the characters face in their old and new worlds give the novel a rich texture as well as a comic streak so familiar in Sidhwa's previous accounts of the Parsis. But the narrative finally leads Feroza to a quest for community, whose fluidity she has discovered. That awareness leads her to seek understanding, so that "Maybe one day she'd soar to that self-contained place from which there was no falling, if there was such a place." (*An American Brat* 317) Feroza realizes that "There would be no going back for her, but she could go back at will." (*An American Brat* 317) In a sense, like so many immigrants, she is between communities, unable to go back fully, unable to go forward fully, until she discovers herself fully. Even Feroza's mother makes this admission as she considers how much different her daughter's experience

will be from her own: “Feroza would navigate her own course through life...[along] the dangerous and alluring trails Zareen had scented in the New World.” (*An American Brat* 308) In contrast, Zareen needs to return to her secure community in order to regain balance, thinking that all would be well “once she was with her family and friends....She needed desperately to be with them, to be assured she had done the right thing.” (*An American Brat* 308)

Astute characterization, a hallmark of Sidhwa’s writing style, keeps the tone lively and entertaining, even when serious issues are at stake. The perennial Parsi problem of inter-faith marriage arises when Feroza wants to marry David Press, an American Jew. The family assemble at Lahore and treat the situation like a dire emergency. Sidhwa through the guise of humour, shows how elders exert the pressures of conformity and tradition on the youngsters by applying forms of emotional blackmail. Reprimanding a young cousin who defends Feroza’s choice of marriage, Grandmother Khutlibai resorts to histrionics whilst relating tales of the horrors of excommunication visited upon those who marry outside the faith. Khutlibai contrived to make her vigorous person look crumpled and close to death while she spoke, so that the spirit of rebellion in Bunny and other youngsters was nipped in the bud. Also Zareen Ginwalla tries to prevent the proposed marriage of her daughter Feroza with David by using the ‘sugar-coated pill’ method. Sidhwa’s blending of astute characterization and sharp humour provides insights into the Parsi psyche and makes the novel both entertaining and revealing. Sidhwa feels this book will appeal to both Americans and young folk of the sub-continent as it is about multi-cultural experiences of living today. She feels that by her book she has changed the cultural stereotypes of America and the Asian sub-continent. In this novel, there is an ironic exposure of the Parsi attitude to inter-faith marriages. The mother Zareen Ginwalla realizes that she is being as fundamentalist as the orthodox mullahs in Pakistan, by opposing her daughter’s marriage. Still the tradition of community and desire for cultural purity prevail and such insights remain only a flash in Zareen’s mind. Still by hinting at such thinking, the novelist indicates the turmoil and acrimonious debate that the contentious issue of inter-community marriage causes amongst Parsis.

The theme of immigration is quite prominent in Bapsi Sidhwa’s *An American Brat*. The heroine of the novel, Feroza, a sixteen-years-old girl has been carefully brought up in the small but prosperous Parsi community in Lahore. Her parents think that she should be saved from being further influenced by the Muslim government. Her mother Zareen is perturbed because Feroza is becoming, more and more backward every day. Feroza has stopped answering the phone because “what if it’s someone I don’t know” (*An American Brat* 10) The un-Parsi like orthodoxy in Feroza’s attitude and outlook alarms her mother who tells her husband that Feroza objects to her wearing a modern dress :

I went to bring Feroza from school today. I was chatting with Mother Superior on the veranda – she was out enjoying the sun – and I had removed my cardigan. Feroza pretended she didn’t know me. (*An American Brat* 10) 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 Parsi, everybody knows we dress differently.” (*An American Brat* 10) 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 little minds so easily, then the mullahs should wear burqas and stay within the four walls of their houses! (*An American Brat* 10)

Zareen feels that Feroza should go to the USA during the summer vacation where her brother Manek, a graduate student at M.I.T., can look after her: “Travel will broaden her outlook, get this puritanical rubbish out of her head.” (*An American Brat* 14) Considering the fact that the farthest Feroza or Zareen have ever travelled was across the border to Bombay, the suggestion to send Feroza off by herself to the US is quite audacious. But Cyrus accepts it because he remembers how timidly Feroza had behaved with a young boy in their drawing room a week ago.

Feroza’s joy knows no bounds as the plans for her trip to the USA are finalized: Feroza slipped under her quite fully dressed, her eyes wide open, her mind throbbing with elation. She was going to America! She found it difficult to believe. She repeated to herself, “I’m going to America, I’m going to America!” until her doubts slowly ebbed and her certainty, too, caught the rhythm of her happiness. To the land of glossy magazines, of “Bewitched” and “Star Trick,” of rock-stars and jeans . . . (*An American Brat* 27)

Throughout her journey, Feroza behaves as instructed by the elders but as soon as she reaches America she is a changed person. As the plane lands at Kennedy Airport, Feroza is triumphant and glowing. She is dazzled by the orderly traffic of rushing people, the bright lights and warmed air, the extraordinary cleanliness and sheen of floors and furnishings, the audacious immensity of the glass-and-steel enclosed spaces.

Feroza is subjected to a rather inhumane treatment by the custom officials. There is a moment of confusion as her Pakistani passport opens from the wrong end. Unlike English, Urdu is written from right to left and not vice versa. And then there is a barrage of questions—how long she would stay, where she would stay, who would support her, how old was her uncle, what did he do, was he a US citizen, resident or visitor. Feroza’s answers do not seem satisfactory to the hostile visitor. Feroza’s answers do not seem satisfactory to the hostile officer and she is directed to go in for secondary inspection after collecting her luggage.

Feroza tries to cope with the different life-style of the Americans and the modern technology used by them. Feroza is quite unfamiliar with the moving staircase, the escalator, which one finds in abundance in even the small stores in the USA. An elderly American couple helps her to cross this hurdle – the man takes the duty – free packages from her hand and the woman takes hold of Feroza’s arm to help her get on and off the escalator.

The next problem Feroza faces is of carrying her outsize suitcases. Approaching an immensely tall porter with a large cart evokes no response. Thrown to her own resources, Feroza finds people carrying the luggage on carts and asks a grey-haired woman where she had gotten her cart. Directed to a shining caterpillar of stacked carts, she struggles to extract one but fails. She finds young men coming and taking away carts one by one after inserting a dollar bill in a slot. As the next man hustles up with the same intention, Feroza steps right in front of the box, barring access and says: "It's my turn." Jolted by her somewhat rude and strange behaviour, the youth comes to an astonished halt. Feroza explains in a manner which is half – apologetic and half-appealing for help: "I don't know how to get this Can you show me?" (*An American Brat* 57) The man smiles flirtatiously and shows her how to insert the dollar bill. As she loads her suitcases and hand luggage on the cart, Feroza's mind is filled with images of the slender young American and his candid admiring eyes: "How easily he had talked to her, his gestures open, confident. She wished she could have responded to his readiness to be friends, but she was too self – conscious." (*An American Brat* 58) She realizes that this was the word which could define her new experience. The people around her were busy with their own concerns; none of them had even bothered to glance her way or stare at her as they would have in Pakistan.

Feroza's wide-open eyes soak in the new impressions as she pushes the cart. A strange awareness seeps into her: she knows no one and no one knows her. It is a heady feeling to be suddenly so free of the thousand constraints that governed her life.

Feroza feels reassured to find Manek waiting for her in the lounge. But the worst is still to come. A woman in blue uniform looks sternly at Feroza and reminds her that she must go in for secondary inspection. The immigration officer leads Feroza to the ominous place where weary passengers stand before their disarrayed possessions with subdued looks. The absorbed customs inspectors take their own, time, checking each and every item in the suitcase which makes each passenger look unaccountably guilty.

Feroza's interrogation starts with a simple query: "Are you a student?" (*An American Brat* 59) However, Feroza is so nervous by then that her answer does not reach the inspector who gets impatient and feels irritated at her response. In a cold, calculating manner he explains to Feroza that the sworn statements she was going to make in a few minute's time should be "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." (*An American Brat* 60) Otherwise she can be fined two thousand dollars or imprisoned for not more than five years or both. This is followed by routine questions about her name, address, date of birth etc. till the officer comes to the crucial questions: "How long do you wish to stay in the US?" (*An American Brat* 60) Feroza's answer "Two or three months" does not satisfy him and he wants her to be more specific. It is at this moment that Feroza blurts out that she will stay with her uncle who is "a student. But he also works at two other jobs to make extra money." (*An American Brat* 61) Evidently, she does not know that it is a crime for foreign students to work. She is told that her uncle would be hauled before an immigration judge and most likely

deported. She too would have to go back on the next available flight. He accuses her of being a liar-she has no uncle in America and her so-called uncle is actually her fiancé.

Feroza finds it difficult to believe her ears. Her eyes begin to smart. To this is added the inspection of each and every item in her bags – the shoes, the toiletries, the underwear, a sanitary pad. Tears roll down Feroza's burning cheeks at the humiliation.

Feroza is relieved to find Manek around, not knowing that he has been paged, his name announced over the loudspeakers in the reception lobby and interrogated. She realizes that she has unwittingly incriminated him with her naïve answers to the questions fired at her and is petrified. In a composed, reliable and trustworthy manner, Manek assures the officer that he indeed is Feroza's uncle, studying chemical engineering at M.I.T. and receives enough money from home for his education and living expenses. The odd jobs he does are for the university which are permitted.

The officer reverts to his aspect of demon prosecutor as he turns to Feroza and tells her: "You are not eligible to enter the US. You and you uncle have concealed the truth. You're both lying. Isn't this man your fiancé? Aren't you here to marry him?" (*An American Brat* 64) The officer holds up between his fingers a lacy pink nylon nightie he has fished out of the bag and triumphantly announces: "Ah-ha...The wedding negligee!" Both immigration officers leer at the nightgown as if it was an incriminating weapon discovered at the scene of a crime. The comment "It's no use, you're lying. Here's the evidence" rouses Feroza who snatches the nightgown from the officer's stubby, desecrating fingers and shouts: "To hell with you and your damn country. I'll go back!" (*An American Brat* 64)

Feroza's immigration officer realizes that he has exceeded his bounds and has surprise stamped all over his soft, shiny face. He accepts Manek's guarantee that the girl will go back at the end of three months or whenever her visa expires and asks Manek to provide proof of his assertions as soon as possible. The officer who had treated Feroza so vilely just a few moments back is now conciliatory. Shaken by the yellow blaze emanating from the eyes Feroza had inherited from Khutlibai, her maternal grandmother, and confounded by the fierce dignity imparted to her genes by Soonamai, her paternal grandmother, he even helps Feroza in stashing her belongings into her suitcase. However the doubt and suspicion of the officer do prove right: Feroza does not go back to Pakistan after three months, her three-month visit turns into a four-year stay!

Bapsi Sidhwa chronicles not only the glitz and glamour but also the ugliness and squalor of the USA. Soon after uncle Manek and Feroza come out of the Kennedy airport, Manek tells Feroza: "You'll love New York. I've planned it so we can spend a week here. Then we'll get back to Cambridge. If I get the time, we'll even go to Disneyland." (*An American Brat* 66) Immediately Feroza notices the garlands of lights outlining the iron rhythm of the bridge they are racing along, the sumptuous red tail-lights of the cars ahead. This is how Bapsi Sidhwa describes the scene:

And then they were climbing into a futuristic spaghetti of curving and incredibly suspended roads, mile upon looping mile of wide highway that weaved in and out of the sky at all angles so that sometimes they descended to the level of the horizon of lights in the distance that Manek told her was Manhattan, and sometimes they appeared to be aiming at the sky. Feroza saw ships in an incredible river. How deep the river must be to hold the ships. (*An American Brat* 67)

The incredible lights excite Feroza so much that she utters in Punjabi: “*Vekh! Vekh! Sher-dibatian!*” (Look, look, the lights of the city.)

The next day Feroza’s tour of New York starts. Uncle Manek and Feroza ride the ferry to the Statue of Liberty and explore the iron innards of the stern figure presiding over the ocean. They gape giddily from atop the Empire State Building midtown and the twin World Trade towers at the tip of the island. They stroll with the nannies and babies through the zoo at Central Park, marvelling each time they lift their incredulous eyes from the wild animals in their native habitats to the shimmering glass and steel embankments of the Manhattan skyline reflecting the sunlight. This is followed by a quick look at the enticing window displays of dresses, shoes, sportswear and jewellery on Fifth Avenue and Madison.

The opulence and shopping in New York simply mesmerize Feroza. Enchanted by the apparel on the skinny mannequins, the colourful patent – leather shoes, the gleaming handbags at Bloomingdale’s on Lexington Avenue, Feroza simply refuses to budge from the place:

It was like entering a surreal world of hushed opulence festooned by all manner of hats propped up on stands and scarves and belts draped here and there like fabulous confetti. The subtle lighting enhanced the plush shimmer of wool and leather and the glowing colours of the silk. Feroza felt she had never seen such luxuriant textures or known the vibrant gloss of true colours. (*An American Brat* 73)

She moves amidst the dazzling wares, bewitched by displays of merchandise which attract her with a suction – like force. Later she insists on window – shopping on Fifth Avenue and ogling the strands of pearls and diamonds displayed at Tiffany’s and elegant skirts and jackets displayed at Christian Dior’s.

When they have lunch at McDonald’s, Feroza is struck with wonder at the quick service and the quantities of fries, ketchup, and the ice in the Coke. She is enchanted by the America and Americans she encounters. She takes great pleasure in shopping malls, fast-food restaurants and modern kitchen appliances. The sudden swing from Lahore to New York seems to have pitched Feroza into the next century. She has a surrealistic impression of blurred images; a kaleidoscope of perceptions in which paintings, dinosaurs, American Indian artefacts and Egyptian mummies mingle with hamburgers, pretzels, sapphire earrings, deodorants, and glamorous window displays.

Feroza's initiation to the USA cannot be complete till she sees the ugly side of New York too. On English Avenue, she walks past small dark video parlours flashing lewd advertising, interspersed by grubby pawn shops, cheap hotels, and bars. Later, Manek directs Feroza's attention to male prostitutes, elegant transvestites – the American – style *heejras* – the pimps and miniskirt prostitutes. He also tells her about “lookouts, runners, and drug dealers.” (*An American Brat* 80) Feroza is shocked to see the Port Authority bus terminal “the infested hub of poverty from which the homeless and the discarded spiralled all over the shadier sidewalks of New York. Ragged and fifthly men were spreading scores of flattened cardboard boxes to sleep on in bus terminal.” (*An American Brat* 80)

Feroza was used to the odour of fifth, the reek of poverty: sweat, urine, open drains, rotting carrion, vegetables and the other debris. She was accustomed to these sights and smells in Pakistan and had developed a tolerance for them. However, she finds it hard to accept the poverty and stench of fifth in the USA. The smells of New York repel her:

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, learning against the wall of the terminal, began to retch. (*An American Brat* 81)

Feroza has a horrifying experience when she is locked out in the YMCA fire-stairs. Returning from shopping around one o'clock, Feroza is surprised by the long lines of people waiting for the elevators. Wondering which line to stand in, Feroza sees one line being rapidly absorbed through open doors into an elevator and joins it. Only when the elevator sails past the fifteenth floor where she is staying does she realize that the different floors of the building. The elevator stops on the twenty – second floor, the level reserved for women and she steps out, not knowing what to do. A sympathetic soul asks her to go down again, get into the correct line, and then take the elevator that goes to the fifteenth floor, the numbers being marked on the top. Feroza feels that this will take a long time and the amiable woman shows her the fire-stairs – she can run down to the fifteenth floor. Feroza steps inside the door hesitantly. As the woman shuts the door at her back, Feroza has a feeling that she has been shut out of New York. She feels disoriented – the air is rank with the smell of stale cigarette smoke and food. She gets a whiff of urine and of decaying refuse too. After a minute or so, she tries to open the door but fails to do so.

Forced to take the stairs, Feroza looks at the accumulated debris in a corner – cigarette butts, food cartons, grimy plastic bags. The atmosphere is weird enough – the shallow steps dissolving in the darkness. At certain places, the banister is loose in its moorings and wobbles beneath her hand. What if some part of the balustrade were missing – as happened in nightmares – or a section of it comes away where the concrete has crumbled, and she is plunged into the void? An unsettling weakness creeps into her legs. She tries the doors on different floors but all of these are locked. She shouts for help but no one listens. She prays to God but it does not help. It seems to her nothing exists outside the stairwell.

America assumed a ruthless, hollow, cylindrical shape without beginning or end, without sunlight, an unfathomable concrete tube inhabited by her fear. She was sure something monstrous was crouched in the impervious shadows that patrolled this alien domain – ferocious sewer rats, a brutish Doberman – breathing softly, waiting patiently. (*An American Brat* 90)

The fear of somebody coming up the stairs makes Feroza fly up the steps. Her heart pounding, she runs up flight after flight of stairs till she feels her lungs would explode and flings herself at a door. Banging on it with her fists, with the palms of her hands, rattling the rod and the handle, she screams: “Open the door....For God’s sake, open the door! Can’t anybody hear me? Please, somebody...” (*An American Brat* 92) Her scream finally attracts a Japanese man who opens the door with a sharp metallic click. Like an uncle or a family friend, he scolds metallic click. Like an uncle or a family friend, he scolds Feroza for her irresponsible act and warns her: “Never do that.....Never! You could be murdered....No one would know. All kinds of shitty people...drugs!” (*An American Brat* 94) It is only later that Feroza realizes that she had been marooned in that hell for only half an hour.

Sidhwa uses the differences in US and Pakistani cultures to highlight Feroza’s development. When Feroza meets some children being brought up by Jo’s brother Tom, she is shocked to learn that they are foster children: “It was so unlike anything in Pakistan. She had never heard of children being sent to foster homes. If a man could not for some reason provide for his family, usually because of sickness, death or some other calamity, his wife and children would be provided for by relatives.” (*An American Brat* 212)

Zareen’s emphasis on the difference between the Zoroastrian and Jewish cultures frightens David away from Feroza. When Zareen insists on fulfilling her traditional obligations by giving fabulous gifts to David’s relatives and making the marriage a big affair, David feels compelled to defend his position. A Jewish marriage is an equally elaborate affair and he tells Zareen:

“My parents aren’t happy about the marriage, either. It’s lucky they’re Reform Jews, otherwise they’d go into mourning and pretend I was dead. We have Jewish customs, you know. My family will miss my getting married under a canopy by our rabbi. We have a great dinner and there’s table with twenty or thirty different kinds of deserts, cake, and fruit. Then there’s dancing until late at night.” David stopped to catch his breath and looked angrily at Zareen. “I belong to an old tradition, too.” (*An American Brat* 298)

Zareen pretends to agree to the marriage but insists on the rituals and ceremonies which repel David. When Zareen performs a ritual to cast out the spell of the evil eye that she feels afflicts Feroza, David recoils in horror. Zareen solemnly draws seven circles in the air over Feroza’s head, all the while whispering a hodgepodge of incantations: “May the mischief of malign and envious eyes leave you, may the evil in my loving eye leave you, may any magic and ill will across the seven seas be banished, may Ahura Mazda’s protection and blessings

guard you.” (*An American Brat* 303) Then she fries jalapeno peppers until they are burned, throws them on the floor and crushes them with her heel. All this is strong medicine for the Jewish David who cries out, “Oh God....What are you? A witch or something?” (*An American Brat* 304)

Thus, Sidhwa has dealt with issues ranging from history to contemporary reality. All her novels are powerful and moving. She seems to be a mature story-teller. Her descriptions are realistic, vivid and uninhibited. She writes in a straightforward and highly entertaining style. Her language, laced with native words and phrases, is racy and colloquial. The fact that her novels have been translated into several languages and published in numerous European and Asian countries, shows her popularity across the world and also the adaptability of her art. Though her literary output is meagre, her place as an English-language novelist in the history of Commonwealth fiction is assured. As she is leading an active life, many more novels are expected from her.

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