

**Community Consciousness In Bapsi Sidhwa's Novel *An American Brat*****¹Dr. Sudhir Kumar Agrawal, ²Dr. Qamar Alam**¹Bhartiyam Vidya Niketan, Gwalior, M.P. India²Former Prof. and Head, Dept. of P.G. Studies and Research in English, K.R.G. Govt. Post Graduate College, Jiwaji University Gwalior, M.P. IndiaE-mail- drsudhiragrawal12@gmail.com

Community consciousness is evident in Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*. In this novel she centralizes the Parsi community and examines several themes of vital importance to the Parsis in the last decade of the twentieth century. Sidhwa deliberately ridicules the residual colonial mentality or what she refers to as the gora complex in *An American Brat* evident among ex-colonials and particularly among the Parsis. The underlying identity crises and quest for security in the Parsi psyche and influence of a patriarchal society also form the basis of *An American Brat*. Above all, this novel examines a very contentious and controversial issue amongst the Parsis, the tradition of prohibition of marriage to a non-Parsi. In making this theme the central concern of the narrative, Sidhwa reveals her ongoing preoccupation with an issue that has very serious ramifications and implications for the Parsi community. The Parsis, a minority culture group anywhere in the world, has a tradition of not allowing either conversion or marriage to a non-Parsi and expelling those who marry outside the community. This tradition is based on certain historical factors, like the five conditions, imposed by the King of Sanjan Jadi Rana, to allow the persecuted Parsis to settle in his territory, over a thousand years ago. However the repercussions of the prohibition of marriage to non-Parsi, is causing grave concern, as it is linked to the survival of the community.

Seemingly this novel is a humorous portrayal of alternately funny and terrifying perceptions of an upper middle class Parsi family about the USA, but the novel functions on two levels. The expatriate experience in which the novelist cleverly juxtaposes first and third world exceptions provide humour. At a serious level, the problem of inter-community marriage and adjustment of a migrant to a different culture is carefully and often ironically delineated. The deft handling of such modern themes by Bapsi Sidhwa makes her novel both complex and entertaining.

In *An American Brat* the marriage theme and feminine sensibility are examined in detail and in a Parsi context. Feroza's horizons widen when she joins a larger university in the more cosmopolitan city of Denver. She moves into an apartment with two American girls and sheds many of her social inhibitions in their company. Her newly acquired confidence and sense of freedom culminates in her falling in love with a Jewish boy, David Press, at Denver. When Feroza announces that she wants to marry David, her family in Pakistan is both agitated and shell shocked. The mother Zareen, flies to Denver to dissuade Feroza from taking a step that would lead to her being ex-communicated and expelled from the faith. The parents are also concerned that such a marriage would bring shame to the family honour. The family's opposition to Feroza's impending marriage represents the pre-dominant traditionalist view of the Parsi community

to such inter-community marriage. However the author also cleverly depicts the growing discontent with such ancient traditions amongst the younger generation of Parsis. While the family is discussing Feroza's predicament, fifteen-year-old Bunny implicitly expresses her revulsion at the rigid code by stating, **"For God's sake! You're carrying on as if Feroza's dead! She's only getting married, for God's sake!"**¹ Other adolescents in the room agree with Bunny's sentiments. However they do not express them, as the dominating majority of elders quell such rebellious sentiments. This seemingly minor incident is used by Sidhwa to focalize the dissent amongst the younger generation of the community and hints at the demand of some re-thinking of the rigid tradition.

Zareen is now trapped in a paradox. She finds David admirable and appealing. Yet she is also aware that such a marriage would deprive her daughter of her faith, heritage, family and community. Zareen recalls the warning from the Athoran Mandal and the Notice from the Bombay Zoroastrian Jashan Committee. As a mother she fears that the marriage would cut Feroza off from her culture and her surroundings and her child would eventually shrivel up. Her dread for Feroza altered her opinion of David. She uses the tactics of **"If you can't knock him out with sugar, slug him with honey"**² to thwart the marriage. She pretends to agree to the marriage but insists on the rituals and ceremonies, which she knows, will frighten David, a very private and reserved person. The relationship disintegrates and Zareen's ploy has partially triumphed. As a Parsi writer, Bapsi Sidhwa does not take a rebellious stance against the dominating ideology of her community. However Sidhwa is no conformist. She does not endorse the traditional Parsi code on inter-community marriage. Instead through Zareen and Feroza's reactions she hints at the need for change. Zareen ironically realizes that by denying her daughter freedom of choice in marriage she and the

educated custodians of the Zoroastrian doctrine **"were no less rigid and ignorant than the fundos in Pakistan."**³ Similarly Feroza is heart-broken after David's departure. However she does not compromise and remains firm in her resolve to not submit to the dictates of Parsi laws against inter-community marriages. She expresses her convictions towards the end of the novel thus:

There would never be another David, but there would be other men, and who knew, perhaps someday she might like someone enough to marry him.

It wouldn't matter if he was a Parsee or of another faith. She would be more sure of herself, and she wouldn't let anyone interfere...As for her religion, no one could take it away from her; she carried its fire in her heart.⁴

So Bapsi Sidhwa cleverly highlights the sensitive issue of inter-community marriages amongst the Parsis, on the subject of marriage, she maintains a clever balance, implicitly opposing the rigid code but not appearing overtly rebellious.

Bapsi Sidhwa's handling of the theme of inter-community marriages is very relevant and contemporary. The issue of inter-faith marriages still arouses acrimonious debates amongst the Parsi community. Orthodox priests and reformists delve into the scriptures to argue over what it takes to be a Parsi. By the traditional rules of the community, a Parsi could be one only by birth. In the wake of a spate of mixed marriages, a number of children were thus deemed 'lost' to the community as were the erring parents. As the Parsis are a patriarchal society there is a strong masculine bias. The rules tend to favour the Parsi men who marry outside the community and their children. The same does not apply for Parsi women.

Thus Bapsi Sidhwa's novel, *An American Brat* has two distinctive movements.

Initially there is the movement towards self-actualization in the life of Feroza Ginwalla made possible by acculturation to the American way of thinking and lifestyles. Later as Feroza achieves a synthesis between tradition and modernity, the theme of marriage is elaborately examined with reference to the Parsis' attempt to maintain the status quo as regards the sanctity of their religion and continuity of their inherited cultural traditions. By providing insights and detailed information about the Parsis and their

culture Sidhwa attempts to foster a better understanding of her community and curbs possible prejudicial misconceptions of the Parsis. In this task she fulfills the essential role of the writer as a preserver of collective tradition, a folk historian and mythmaker.

REFERENCES

- [1] Sidhwa, Bapsi. *An American Brat*. New Delhi: Penguin India, 1993. p. 268.
- [2] *ibid.*, p. 272.
- [3] *ibid.*, p. 305.
- [4] *ibid.*, p. 317.

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