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Patriarchy, Feminism and Sexuality in Bapsi Sidhwa's An American Brat: Migration, Marriage and the Communal Control of the Female Body

Ms. Milanpreet*[1], Prof. (Dr.) Narender Kumar[2]
[1]Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of English, Baba Mastnath University, Asthal Bohar, Rohtak, Haryana, India
Email Id: milanpreet803@gmail.com
[2]Ph.D Supervisor, Department of English, Baba Mastnath University, Asthal Bohar, Rohtak, Haryana, India
***Corresponding Author**
Ms. Milanpreet
Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of English, Baba Mastnath University, Asthal Bohar, Rohtak, Haryana, India
Email Id: milanpreet803@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
Scholarship on Bapsi Sidhwa has concentrated overwhelmingly on Partition, nationhood and Parsi ethnic identity, with Cracking India and The Crow Eaters receiving the bulk of critical attention. An American Brat (1993), her novel of a young Parsi woman's migration from Zia-era Lahore to the United States, has more often been read as a comic novel of cultural adjustment than as a sustained inquiry into how patriarchy governs female sexuality. This article addresses that gap by asking how Sidhwa represents patriarchal power that operates not through violence but through love, family duty, religious belonging and communal survival, and how her heroine, Feroza Ginwalla, negotiates that power through migration. The study adopts a postcolonial feminist framework drawing on Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of the monolithic "third world woman," Deniz Kandiyoti's concept of the "patriarchal bargain," Nira Yuval-Davis's analysis of women as bearers of collective identity, and Michel Foucault's account of internalised surveillance, alongside diaspora theory from Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall and Avtar Brah. Methodologically, it combines close reading with attention to narrative form, examining how Sidhwa's ironic, comic omniscience and her adaptation of the Bildungsroman shape the novel's feminist argument. It also draws on ethnographic scholarship on the Parsi community to situate the novel's gendered exogamy rule, under which a woman who marries outside the faith risks exclusion while a man does not. The article argues that the novel exposes a "quiet patriarchy" whose most effective agents are loving women, and that it refuses the binary of an oppressive East and a liberating West that Mohanty and Lila Abu-Lughod have criticised. Feroza's agency is real but costly: she gains the capacity to choose while losing the relationship she chose. The article contributes a reading of An American Brat as a feminist migration narrative, demonstrates how comic irony functions as a mode of feminist critique, and extends postcolonial feminist theory on the communal control of women's bodies into the context of South Asian diaspora.

Keywords: Bapsi Sidhwa; postcolonial feminism; Parsi community; migration; diaspora; female sexuality; Bildungsroman.

INTRODUCTION
Bapsi Sidhwa occupies a distinctive position in South Asian writing in English. A Parsi woman from Lahore who wrote from a small religious minority within a predominantly Muslim nation, she brought to Pakistani fiction a comic vision that her critics have repeatedly noted (Dhawan and Kapadia). Her best-known work, Cracking India (Sidhwa, Cracking India), has been studied extensively for its representation of Partition violence and the gendered body of the nation (Hai; Didur), and it reached a global audience through Deepa Mehta's film adaptation (Earth). That cross-media history is itself instructive: the novel that became a film is the one critics remember, while An American Brat (1993), a novel concerned less with spectacular violence than with ordinary domestic authority, has attracted comparatively little sustained feminist analysis.
The novel follows Feroza Ginwalla, a sixteen-year-old Parsi girl whose parents send her to America in the late 1970s because they fear that the conservative climate of General Zia-ul-Haq's Pakistan is narrowing her mind. A short visit becomes a new life. Feroza studies, changes her dress and habits, and falls in love with David Press, a Jewish American. Her mother, Zareen, travels across the world to stop the marriage, since a Parsi woman who

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marries outside the community risks losing her place within it. The relationship ultimately ends, and Feroza remains in America, freer and lonelier than before.

This article asks a specific question: how does An American Brat represent a patriarchy that works through affection and communal obligation rather than through force, and what forms of female agency does migration make possible within it? The argument is that Sidhwa exposes a "quiet patriarchy" whose authority is exercised through love, guilt and belonging, that the female body is the site on which the community's continuity is staked, and that Feroza's growth into selfhood is both genuine and costly. The novel's comic narrative mode is central to this argument rather than incidental to it.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHOD

The study is grounded in postcolonial feminism. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western feminist scholarship that constructs a singular, monolithic "third world woman" warns against reading Feroza simply as an oppressed Eastern woman liberated by the West (Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes" 333). Lila Abu-Lughod's later critique of rescue narratives sharpens this caution (Abu-Lughod), as does Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's analysis of a subaltern woman spoken for by competing patriarchal and colonial discourses, a condition she summarised in the claim that "The subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak 308). Mohanty's later call for feminist analysis attentive to specific histories and to solidarity across borders informs the comparative and transnational dimension of the reading (Mohanty, Feminism without Borders). Two concepts from feminist social theory are central. Deniz Kandiyoti's notion of the "patriarchal bargain" describes how women within particular systems accept constraints in exchange for security and status, and come to defend those systems as they age and gain authority within them (Kandiyoti 274). Nira Yuval-Davis has shown that women are frequently constructed as the biological and cultural reproducers of collectivities, so that the boundaries of a community are policed through the regulation of women's sexuality and marriage (Yuval-Davis). Kate Millett's account of patriarchy as a structure of "power-structured relationships" maintained through consent (Millett 23), Simone de Beauvoir's account of woman as "the Other" (Beauvoir 6), and Michel Foucault's description of the subject who internalises surveillance and "becomes the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault, Discipline 203)

supply the broader theory of power.

For the migration narrative, the article draws on diaspora theory: Homi Bhabha's account of hybridity and the "Third Space" of enunciation (Bhabha 37), Stuart Hall's insistence that cultural identity is "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'" (Hall 225), and Avtar Brah's concept of "homing desire" as distinct from a desire for a literal homeland (Brah 180). The method combines close reading with narrative analysis, attending to Sidhwa's ironic omniscient narration and to her adaptation of the Bildungsroman, a genre that Franco Moretti identifies with the tension between individual self-determination and social integration (Moretti). Ethnographic and historical scholarship on the Parsi community and on Zia-era Pakistan provides the necessary context (Luhrmann; Jalal; Mumtaz and Shaheed).

SIDHWA AS A POSTCOLONIAL PARSI WOMAN WRITER AND THE QUESTION OF NARRATIVE FORM

Sidhwa writes from a position of multiple marginality: as a woman, as a member of the Parsi minority in Pakistan, and as a writer in English within a postcolonial literary field. The Parsis, Zoroastrians who settled in western India more than a millennium ago and prospered under British rule, occupied an ambivalent position after independence, as Luhrmann's account of the community's postcolonial anxieties makes clear (Luhrmann). Sidhwa's earlier novel The Crow Eaters satirised the Parsi family through comic exaggeration, and critics have noted that her humour allows her to criticise a community from within without disowning it (Dhawan and Kapadia). An American Brat extends this insider's irony across national borders.

This narrative position has consequences for the novel's feminism. Sidhwa's omniscient narrator moves freely between characters, rendering Zareen's anxieties, Manek's bravado and Feroza's confusion with equal sympathy and equal irony. The effect is to distribute understanding rather than blame. Patriarchy is not embodied in a single villain, as it is in the Gothic tradition, but is diffused across the consciousnesses of characters who love one another. Comic narration is thus the formal equivalent of the novel's argument: a patriarchy that operates through affection can only be represented by a narrator who refuses to make its agents simply contemptible. Hutcheon's observation that irony always has an evaluative "edge," wounding as well as amusing (Hutcheon), explains how this sympathetic narration nonetheless delivers critique.

The novel's structure also revises the classic novel of formation. Where the European Bildungsroman traditionally ends in marriage and social integration (Moretti), Sidhwa's narrative withholds both. Feroza's education is completed not by entry into a society but by recognition that she cannot fully belong to either of the societies she has inhabited. Joseph Slaughter has argued that the Bildungsroman in its postcolonial and transnational forms becomes a genre through which the claims of the individual are tested against those of the community and the

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state (Slaughter). Read in this light, An American Brat is a feminist Bildungsroman in which the protagonist's development exposes the gendered terms on which communities grant belonging.

RELIGION, TRADITION AND PATRIARCHAL AUTHORITY IN LAHORE

The novel opens in Lahore after General Zia-ul-Haq's 1977 coup and the subsequent programme of Islamisation, including the Hudood Ordinances of 1979, which placed women in a precarious legal position and intensified pressure on their dress and public presence. Ayesha Jalal has analysed how the Pakistani state in this period made women's subordination a marker of its Islamic legitimacy (Jalal), and Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed have documented the resulting constraints and the women's movement that resisted them (Mumtaz and Shaheed).

Sidhwa's treatment of this climate is marked by irony. It is not the parents who impose conservative values on the daughter but the daughter who has absorbed them from school and street. Feroza is embarrassed by her mother's sleeveless clothing and objects to her appearance in public. The reversal shows how thoroughly a society's values can enter a young woman's mind without overt coercion. In Foucault's terms, Feroza has internalised the watching gaze of a society growing more conservative and now polices her mother's body on its behalf (Foucault, Discipline 203). Power does not require men to enforce it at every moment; women carry it themselves.

The decision to send Feroza abroad is equally double-edged. It reveals the Ginwallas as a modern, educated family who fear the effect of the new religious climate on their daughter, yet it is also an exercise of parental authority: Feroza does not choose to go. Within the household, authority is shared with older women, especially Feroza's grandmother Khutlibai, who recalls the formidable matriarchs of Sidhwa's earlier fiction (Sidhwa, Crow Eaters). Kandiyoti's concept of the patriarchal bargain explains why such women become custodians of the rules that once constrained them: seniority within the system brings authority over younger women (Kandiyoti 274). Patriarchy in Sidhwa's Lahore is therefore not a matter of individual tyrants but of layered authority, extending from the state through the community to the family.

DISPLACEMENT AND THE CRISIS OF IDENTITY

Feroza's arrival in the United States, beginning with a humiliating encounter with immigration officials, dramatises the experience of becoming "other." The comforts of class and community that defined her in Lahore lose their value, and she must learn the codes of a new society. Her uncle Manek, already acculturated, assumes the role of guide, and his first lesson is delivered with the confidence of a young man who has adapted:

The first lesson you learn in America is, you don't get something for nothing. If you want to get into the right college you have to work for it. Nothing is given to you on a plate. You don't know that because nobody works in Pakistan. Not your father, your grandfathers or uncles. (Sidhwa, American Brat 124)

The passage is characteristic of Sidhwa's narrative method. Manek's speech is comic in its exaggeration, and the narration allows the reader to register both its partial truth and its arrogance. The lessons of the new world reach Feroza through the voice of a male relative, so that migration does not immediately free her from male guidance; it changes the guide. Linda Hutcheon's analysis of irony as a discursive strategy with an evaluative "edge" is useful here: Sidhwa's comedy is not decorative but critical, allowing her to expose the pretensions of both Pakistani and American patriarchal assumptions without adopting a tone of denunciation (Hutcheon).

Over time Feroza changes her dress, her speech and her habits. Bhabha's account of colonial mimicry as producing a subject who is "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 86) captures the ambivalence of this process, while his concept of the Third Space describes the hybrid position she comes to occupy (Bhabha 37). Hall's formulation of identity as "becoming" rather than fixed "being" (Hall 225) explains why the novel refuses to present Feroza's Americanisation as either loss or liberation alone. Sidhwa's adaptation of the Bildungsroman is significant here. Moretti describes the classical form as one in which the protagonist's development culminates in reconciliation with society (Moretti); Feroza's development instead produces a subject who belongs fully to neither society.

BEYOND THE FREE WEST AND THE OPPRESSED EAST

The novel's most important political move is its refusal of a simple opposition between a repressive Pakistan and a liberating America. Feroza gains real freedoms: education, mobility, the right to choose her friends, her clothes and eventually her partner. Yet America presents its own forms of objectification, loneliness and racialised exclusion. Inderpal Grewal has shown how America functions in transnational imaginaries as a site of rights and choice, an image that conceals the inequalities migrants encounter (Grewal). Sidhwa's comedy repeatedly deflates this image.

Mohanty's warning against representing third-world women as uniformly victimised is directly relevant (Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes" 333). Sidhwa's Pakistani women are not passive: Zareen is lively and resourceful, Khutlibai formidable. Abu-Lughod's critique of narratives in which Western freedom rescues Muslim or South Asian women (Abu-Lughod) helps to explain why the novel ends without granting Feroza an American happy ending. Sara Ahmed's account of the "melancholic migrant," whose happiness is demanded as proof of successful

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integration, illuminates the unresolved emotional texture of Feroza's final position (Ahmed). Freedom in America is genuine but incomplete, and its costs are borne by the migrant woman.

MARRIAGE, COMMUNITY AND THE CONTROL OF THE FEMALE BODY

The central crisis arises when Feroza falls in love with David Press. Their relationship grows out of friendship and mutual feeling and represents the fullest expression of her new self, a choice made without parents, community or matchmaking. It is also the moment at which the community's rules reach across the ocean.

The Parsi community has traditionally refused converts, so that identity is inherited by birth, and has applied its exogamy rule unequally. The children of a Parsi man who marries outside the faith have generally been accepted as Parsi, while a woman who does so has traditionally risked exclusion from fire temples and community rites, and her children have not been accepted. T. M. Luhrmann's ethnography of the Parsis describes a community anxious about demographic decline and its postcolonial status (Luhrmann). The gendered rule exemplifies Yuval-Davis's argument that women are constituted as bearers of the collectivity's identity and honour, so that the community's boundaries are drawn on their bodies (Yuval-Davis). The rule assumes that identity passes through the male line and that a woman's value lies in her capacity to produce Parsi children with a Parsi husband.

Zareen's journey to America physically brings this authority into Feroza's new world. Sidhwa presents her with sympathy and comedy. She is not a tyrant but a loving, worried mother who argues, pleads and warns of the losses her daughter will suffer, and who shows genuine warmth towards David himself. What she cannot accept is what the marriage would mean for Feroza's place in the community. Her transformation from the liberal mother criticised for her sleeveless dress into the defender of communal rules exemplifies Kandiyoti's patriarchal bargain (Kandiyoti 274) and Millett's argument that patriarchy is sustained by the consent of those it constrains (Millett 23).

No one locks Feroza in a room. The control operates through love, guilt and belonging, and it is arguably more effective than force because it works on conscience rather than on the body directly. Feroza remains conscious, thousands of miles from Lahore, of how her choices will be seen at home; Zareen's arrival makes that watching gaze present in person (Foucault, Discipline 203). The conflict is ultimately between two definitions of Feroza: a member of a community whose choices partly belong to it, or a subject entitled to define herself. Beauvoir's distinction between man as "the Subject" and woman as "the Other" (Beauvoir 6) names the stakes. Psychological research on objectification suggests that women who are judged as bodies often learn to judge their own desires through the same external eyes (Calogero and Thompson); Feroza's struggle is in part a struggle to experience her own desire as legitimate rather than shameful.

The relationship does not end in marriage. Under the weight of family opposition and the questions of religion and identity it raises, David withdraws. Sidhwa presents the outcome neither as a victory for Zareen nor as a simple defeat for Feroza, but as the painful result of a situation in which communal rules and the pressures of identity make it very difficult for two people from different worlds to build a life together.

Towards Agency and Self-Definition

The novel's conclusion shows Feroza hurt but not broken. Crucially, she does not return to Lahore to resume the life her family had planned; she chooses to remain in America. The girl who was sent abroad without being consulted now decides for herself. Beauvoir's claim that "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (Beauvoir 283) is enacted in reverse: Feroza unbecomes the woman her community scripted. Hélène Cixous's insistence that woman "must write her self" (Cixous 875) can be read figuratively here, since Feroza claims authorship of her own life even though she does not write. Brah's distinction between homing desire and the desire for a homeland (Brah 180) explains her final condition: she longs for belonging without wishing to return.

Feroza's resistance, then, is genuine but limited. She moves from being spoken for, Spivak's condition of the subaltern woman (Spivak 308), to speaking for herself, but the structures that constrained her remain intact. The community's rule is unchanged, and her freedom is purchased with loneliness and distance from those she loves. This is the novel's most significant feminist insight: individual escape is possible, but it does not dismantle the structures of control from which one escapes.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that An American Brat deserves recognition as a serious feminist migration narrative rather than merely a comedy of cultural adjustment. Sidhwa exposes a quiet patriarchy that works through love, family duty and communal survival, in which women such as Khutlibai and Zareen act as custodians of the rules that constrain younger women. The gendered Parsi exogamy rule reveals the female body as the site on which communal continuity is staked. The novel's ironic narrative mode and its revised Bildungsroman refuse both the image of the uniformly oppressed Eastern woman and the fantasy of a liberating West.

The article's contribution is threefold. It extends postcolonial feminist theory on the communal regulation of women's sexuality into the context of South Asian diaspora; it demonstrates that comic irony can function as a

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rigorous mode of feminist critique; and it shows that Sidhwa's model of agency is relational and costly rather than triumphant. Further research might compare Feroza's trajectory with other South Asian diasporic heroines, or examine how the screen adaptation of Sidhwa's work in Earth, and her novelisation of Mehta's Water (Sidhwa, Water), redistribute the narrative authority of women across media.

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