

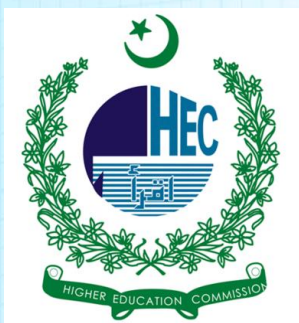
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**Cultural and Religious Conflicts in Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*:
A Postcolonial Perspective**



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Abstract

This study explores the theme of cultural conflict in Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *An American Brat* through a postcolonial lens. The novel presents a powerful narrative of identity crisis, generational divide, and cultural dislocation within the Parsee community, particularly through the character of Feroza. Using Homi K. Bhabha's concept of "Othering" as the theoretical framework, the research highlights how characters negotiate between Eastern traditions and Western modernity. The study is qualitative in nature, and the close reading technique is applied to selected excerpts from the novel to critically analyze moments of cultural collision, religious practice, and resistance to traditional values. Furthermore, key passages have been purposively selected for their relevance to the central themes of identity and cultural transformation. The discourse between Feroza and her mother Zareen reveals a deep cultural gap, reflecting the societal influence of religious conservatism under General Zia's regime. The narrative also presents symbolic cultural moments such as religious announcements by the mullah and Parsee communal gatherings, that illustrate a hybrid, often conflicted, postcolonial identity. The analysis suggests that the novel critiques rigid cultural norms and exposes the psychological burden of navigating conflicting cultural affiliations. In short, the paper demonstrates that *An American Brat* serves as a rich postcolonial text, foregrounding issues of identity, belonging, and the complexities of cultural inheritance in a globalized world.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Cultural Conflict, Identity Crisis, Parsee Community, Othering, Homi K. Bhabha, Close Reading, Bapsi Sidhwa, *An American Brat*, Cultural Hybridity

Background of the Study

In the era following colonial rule, postcolonial literature has emerged as a powerful platform for formerly colonized writers to reconstruct their cultural identities and critique colonial legacies. One of the dominant themes explored in postcolonial discourse is cultural conflict, particularly the tensions between traditional values and modern ideologies. This conflict becomes more pronounced in societies navigating between Eastern traditions and Western influence, especially in countries like Pakistan,

where religion, colonial history, and globalization intersect (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002).

Moreover, Bapsi Sidhwa, a prominent Pakistani-American writer, has extensively portrayed themes of cultural displacement, gender identity, and postcolonial subjectivity in her works. Her novel *An American Brat* (1993) centers on Feroza, a young Parsee girl from Pakistan who is sent to America in hopes of becoming more liberal and independent. However, her exposure to American culture leads to a rejection of her traditional Parsee roots, resulting in a deep identity crisis and a clash between generations. This tension reflects the postcolonial struggle of hybrid identities who exist in liminal spaces, neither fully Eastern nor fully Western (Bhabha, 1994).

In this connection, the Parsees, a Zoroastrian minority in Pakistan, represent a distinct cultural group with their own traditions, language, and religious practices. In *An American Brat*, Sidhwa uses this community as a microcosm to reflect larger postcolonial issues, particularly the challenges faced by minority cultures in preserving their identity amid dominant religious or political narratives (Loomba, 2015). The novel also subtly critiques the Islamization policies under General Zia-ul-Haq's regime, which shaped conservative attitudes in Pakistani society and contributed to generational tensions around dress, gender roles, and freedom (Shaikh, 2009).

Therefore, The study situates *An American Brat* within the broader context of postcolonial identity formation, with particular attention to Homi K. Bhabha's theory of "Othering", which explains how individuals and cultures are marginalized through processes of stereotyping and exclusion (Bhabha, 1994). Through the lens of this theory, the novel is examined as a site of cultural negotiation, resistance, and transformation, with emphasis on Feroza's psychological and ideological journey.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the cultural and religious conflicts faced by characters in Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*, using a postcolonial perspective. It aims to show how cultural and religious values clash across generations and how individuals navigate the tensions between Eastern traditions and Western influences.

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Research Objective

1. To explore how Bapsi Sidhwa, in her novel *An American Brat*, presents cultural and religious conflicts, particularly the clash between Eastern traditions and Western influences.

Research Question

1. How does Bapsi Sidhwa portray cultural and religious conflicts in her novel *An American Brat*?

Literature Review

Bapsi Sidhwa is described by Muneeza Shamsie (2017) as "the first to provide the 'homegrown' Pakistani-English book a clear, current voice" (p. 195). In her literary works, Sidhwa primarily focuses on the history and the changing social and political structures of her community. She gives voice to the struggles of local ethnic groups, minority identities, marginalized communities, tribal people, and especially women. Her major novels including *The Crow Eaters* (1979), *The Bride* (1982), *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988), *An American Brat* (1993), and *Water* (2006), highlight these themes. *Water* was later developed into a novel based on Deepa Mehta's acclaimed screenplay. Furthermore, Hamid (2007) explores the cultural conflict between the East and the West in his novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. He suggests that the failure of the relationship between Changez and Erica stems from their differing racial and cultural backgrounds. This cultural divide places them in separate worlds. In an effort to win Erica's affection, Changez attempts to assimilate by sacrificing his name, identity, and culture, adopting the persona of "Chris." It is only when he performs this cultural erasure that the white woman considers accepting him. Hamid argues that non-Americans are often only accepted when they fully abandon their own cultural identities and acknowledge the superiority of American norms.

In this connection, Kane (2004), an African novelist, also investigates cultural tensions. He expresses interest in understanding his own cultural heritage and emphasizes the importance of acknowledging colonial legacies as part of the cultural fabric of formerly colonized nations. According to Kane, cultural conflicts contribute to global diversity. He identifies two major groups in today's world: one that embraces modernity and promotes universal cultural values, and another that clings to radicalism and cultural rigidity. His work demonstrates that cultural diversity is not an

anomaly but a fundamental aspect of human civilization.

Additionally, historically, culture has played a central role in shaping societies and influencing human behavior. It is a driving force behind both peace and conflict. The power of culture inspires individuals toward both virtuous and destructive acts. It also creates a sense of belonging and identity, often fostering bonds between individuals who share a language or accent.

Research Gap

While considerable research has been conducted on cultural conflict, identity crisis, and East–West relations in postcolonial literature, there is limited scholarly focus on how Bapsi Sidhwa’s *An American Brat* specifically portrays generational and cultural tension within the framework of postcolonial identity. Most studies have either broadly addressed Sidhwa’s works or focused on different novels such as *The Bride* or *Ice-Candy-Man*. This study attempts to fill the gap by closely analyzing *An American Brat* through the lens of postcolonial theory, highlighting how cultural dislocation, resistance, and hybridity are reflected through the protagonist’s journey.

Methodology

Research Design and Type

This research adopts a qualitative approach, as it seeks to explore and interpret the deeper meanings embedded in the text rather than to quantify data or test hypotheses. Qualitative research is appropriate when the aim is to understand complex social phenomena, such as cultural identity, conflict, or postcolonial power structures (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Since the present study delves into themes of cultural collision, identity crisis, and the postcolonial experience, a qualitative design allows for flexible, in-depth analysis of the literary text.

Theoretical Framework

The study is rooted in postcolonial theory, particularly focusing on Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of “Othering” and hybridity. Bhabha (1994) argues that the identity of colonized subjects is formed through a process of ambivalence and negotiation with dominant colonial discourses. The concept of “Otherness” refers to the process of defining colonized people as different, inferior, and alien to the colonizers. This framework provides a lens to critically examine how Feroza, her family, and other characters negotiate their identities in the culturally hybrid space between East and

West in An American Brat.

Data Collection Method

The primary source for this study is Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *An American Brat*. Specific excerpts and paragraphs were selected through purposive sampling, based on their relevance to the research question and their representation of cultural conflict and identity crisis. The selected passages involve dialogues and narrative descriptions that directly reflect: Conflicts between Eastern and Western cultural values (e.g., clothing, language, behavior). Generational gaps in cultural understanding. Representation of Parsee cultural identity and religious practices. Irony, satire, or symbolic critique of cultural or religious authority (e.g., depiction of mullahs or traditional rituals). This method of sampling is justified in qualitative research, especially in literary studies, as it allows the researcher to focus on segments of text that are rich in meaning and thematically significant (Patton, 2015).

Data Analysis Method

To analyze the selected data, the close reading technique has been employed. Close reading involves a careful, sustained interpretation of a brief passage of a text. This method is ideal for literary analysis, as it encourages detailed attention to language, tone, symbolism, and narrative structure (Brummett, 2010). Through close reading, the researcher interprets how cultural and religious conflicts are constructed through the characters' language, attitudes, and interactions. The analysis also considers implicit ideological messages, symbolic representations, and the postcolonial subtext embedded in the dialogues and narrative descriptions. The rationale for this method lies in the belief that every textual detail is meaningful and contributes to the broader thematic and ideological fabric of the work. Close reading also aligns with postcolonial theory, which demands attentiveness to both overt and covert discursive strategies used in literary texts (Loomba, 2015).

Interpretative Strategy

The researcher's interpretation acknowledges that literary meaning is not fixed or singular. Instead, meaning is constructed through the interplay of textual elements and reader engagement. Therefore, multiple interpretations are possible and valid, provided they are grounded in textual evidence (Fish, 1980). The aim is not to find one definitive reading but to highlight how the text negotiates and represents cultural

identity and postcolonial tensions.

Data Analysis and Discussion

This section presents a detailed analysis and interpretation of selected excerpts from Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat* through the lens of postcolonial theory. The focus is on identifying instances of cultural conflict, identity crisis, and generational tensions faced by the characters, particularly the protagonist Feroza. By applying close reading techniques, the study examines how Sidhwa portrays the struggle between traditional Eastern values and Western influences, revealing deeper insights into the complexities of postcolonial identity and cultural hybridity.

Cultural Conflict

The below fictional paragraph is based on cultural conflict. It is the discourse between Feroza and her mother on the topic of Parsee way of life and their cultural dress. Feroza tells her mother not to dress like she did. It is the situation where Zareen went Feroza's school on special occasion. The historical illusion can add information to provide answer to the research question. As a whole the excerpt provides answers to the research question.

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 Parsee, everybody knows we dress differently. (Sidhwa, 1993, p.10)

The above paragraph highlights the cultural collision in Parsee community. The background of the paragraph shows that Feroza retains her mother from such dress. It was the occasion when Zareen mother of Feroza is going to a function in school, on that occasion Feroza is not happy to see her mother in such dress. This sentence shows the fundamentalist attitude on Zareen's daughter Feroza. The dialogue between Feroza and her Mom shows clearly that there is huge cultural gap because she does not like her Mom to come behind her in local sari dress as it is embarrassing for her and she feels shame over it. The discourse shows the identity of Parsee' culture and their way of life. Moreover, Feroza is narrow and she can't accept such dress of her mother. From Feroza's discourse, it is revealed that their Parsee culture is indifferent from other community. Feroza tells her mother that we are Parsee people and have a changed religion from other community people. In Parsee culture it is

shameful to dress like Feroza's mother did. Zareen's attitude is different towards her daughter as she provides the example of General Zia. General Zia was a dictator, during his dictatorship he banned such liberal wandering of women in Pakistani society. Now Zareen ironically compares her daughter with the religious concept of her daughter. It shows that Zareen negate this fundamental concept of her daughter. The scholar observes that there is a clash of cultural collision in the above discourse.

Culture and Parsee Community

The following paragraph reflects the typical culture of Parsee people. All the members of the Parsee family and their relatives are gathered in the front lawn surrounded by thick gardenia and rose hedges. Farewell party is being celebrated there and all the guests and hosts are dressed in the typical Parsee shalwar kamiz and woolen waistcoats.

Since it was Friday, the Muslim sabbath, Cyrus was home. Debonair in an ivory raw silk shalwar-kamiz and matching woolen waistcoat, Cyrus led the guests — mostly relatives, Parsee friends, and a sprinkling of close Muslim friends from their nightly round of parties — into the front lawn, boxed in by thick gardenia and rose hedges. The farewell was an almost ceremonial occasions and, as such, an essentially

Parsee

affair

(Sidhwa, 1993, p.42)

The above paragraph based on cultural and religious identity of Parsee people. The fictional conversation highlights the holy day of Parsee culture on which they dress themselves in shalwar-kameez and woolen waistcoat. Cyrus was leading from the front among the guests. They are all local Parsee Muslim friends and relatives who have come from night party in the front lawn. The whole show is the reflection of the local Parsee culture. Cyrus, father of Feroza is going to invite his friends on the holy twilight in his house. It is a day where Parsee families invites relatives, friends and siblings for the holy activities, now Cyrus' guests and relatives are busy in religious activities i.e. Parsee religion. They separated themselves from other communities as accounted themselves unique and have their own identity. Moreover, Muslim friends are invited in this holy day, they communicate in Parsee culture and religion. Parsee's community friends, guests, and relatives have adopted different dress but on the other hand Muslim' are different and took different dresses. The affair

on this occasion is Parsee even for the Muslim' too it is different. The whole paragraph indicates the cultural and religion. The above text highlights the typical parsee cultural local spicy dishes and its service. This paragraph has beautifully depicted as how local foods are cooked and served by the local Parsee cooks wearing foot long aprons which reflects the typical local mentality of the Parsee cooks.

Culture and Religion

The below monologue of Mullah reflects the concept of religion along with cultural representation. It is the situation where mullah of the mosque make announcement of the missing children in Parsee community. The Mullah's discourse provides answer to the research question as it highlights the concept of religion along with Parsee culture. Moreover, apart from this, Mullah's religious ideology has been constructed in the below excerpt.

The maulvi made a few announcements that rent the peaceful afternoon, "A girl, age five, who answers to the name of Shameem, is missing. She is wearing a red cardigan and gold earrings ... A boy, age three, who answers to the name of Akhtar, is missing. He is wearing a white shirt and blue knickers ...," and then the Main Market maulvi proceeded to shred the afternoon completely, when, accompanied by a children's choir, he began to sing religious sotheir. (Sidhwa, 1993, p.5).

The above paragraph depicts the true picture of the local loudspeaker culture and its miss-use in the local streets mosques by the Mullahs, calling their religious friends who sing their local traditional Nats and Hamds even they do not know the very ABC of religion. They also use loudspeakers for public propaganda and other advertisements and proclamations like for missing kids etc. The above discourse presents Parsee culture and religious activities. Some of the children are missing somewhere in Lahore, now the religious preacher is trying to found the children somewhere. On this occasion different type of activities is conducted, mullahs take mike of the mosque while other visitors are trying to do something practical.

Furthermore, this paragraph shows the cultural and religious rituals being paid by the main character Feroza and her family. Feroza is reciting ancient prayers taught to her by her grandmother even though she does not understand the meaning of a single word but still she believes in it blindly. Feroza is totally oblivion of her own eastern culture and religion but still she reads and recites in the translated version

given to her by her maternal uncle. This paragraph clearly shows the hybrid and collided culture in which the main character is stranded. Moreover, Mullah's personal interest is shown in this context. On one side he is declaring about the missing children and on the other hand he is singing religious songs to take the attentions of the common mass. Mullah's announcement carries hegemonic power as common people listen it carefully. At the end of the discourse, he takes personal interest while singing songs. In Pakistani society, it is common to declare/announce any issue in mosque, and Mullahs are habitual to do so for their personal interest. In short, the excerpt shows the ideological construction of religion and culture in Pakistani society.

Findings

The study found that Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *An American Brat* clearly shows cultural conflict and identity struggle. The main character, Feroza, faces confusion between her Eastern Parsee traditions and the Western culture she experiences in America. She feels embarrassed by her mother's traditional dress and behavior, which shows a generational and cultural gap.

Furthermore, the novel also highlights how religious and cultural identities are shaped by society, especially under political influences like General Zia's regime in Pakistan. The Parsee community is shown as trying to protect its unique identity while living among different religious and cultural groups. Characters like the Mullah are used to show how religion can be misused for personal or public influence. Feroza's blind following of religious rituals without understanding them shows her confused identity. In short, the novel presents a clash between tradition and modernity, showing how postcolonial people often feel caught between two cultures.

Conclusion

The study reveals that Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat* offers a powerful portrayal of the cultural conflict and identity crisis experienced by individuals living between Eastern and Western worlds. Through the character of Feroza and her interactions with her family and society, the novel reflects the struggle of maintaining traditional values while adapting to modern lifestyles. The study concludes that Sidhwa effectively uses themes of cultural clash, generational tension, and religious identity to highlight the challenges faced by postcolonial individuals, especially women, in forming their sense of self.

Moreover, by applying postcolonial theory particularly Homi K. Bhabha's concept of "Othering", the research shows how characters are caught in a hybrid cultural space, feeling pressure from both their inherited traditions and the influences of a changing global world. The novel not only critiques societal norms but also encourages a deeper understanding of identity, belonging, and transformation in postcolonial contexts.

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