



GENDER AND PATRIARCHY IN BAPSI SIDHWA'S 'AN AMERICAN BRAT'

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ABSTRACT

The scope of the novel includes an unbiased review of religion and gender politics in patriarchal and fundamentalist Pakistan. Religious fundamentalism, fanaticism and gender bias always go hand in hand, but both support each other. After the introduction of the Hadood Ordinances, in Pakistan, in 1979, the gender bias in the law system is renewed. The novel expresses some strong repudiation of empty and rigid Parsi traditions. The voices of the protagonist Feroza and her mother Zareen are the voices of marginalized Asian women who protest the narrowness of religious and social attitudes towards women, and are pleas for more liberal, understanding socio-religious communities.

KEYWORDS: Religious fundamentalism, fanaticism, gender bias, patriarchy.

INTRODUCTION

Bapsi Sidhwa is a well known Parsi writer from Pakistan whose fiction has won fame both at home and abroad with which she particularly depicts the women of the South Asian sub-continent and their predicament. In Bapsi Sidhwa's writing, her notions of gender appear to be central. In an Interview when asked about her notions of gender, she replies: "Yes I do write with a feminine sensibility.... I hate to preach about feminism, but I let the characters speak for themselves and what the characters go through illustrates what a woman goes through in our part of the world."¹

The novel provides commentary on the new generation of Parsi girls in Pakistan who are forced to re-assess their freedom in the Islamic country and freedom of choice for marriage in the orthodox Parsi community, where they are increasingly marginalized. Like in all other novels, in 'An American Brat', Sidhwa is sensitive to gender and patriarchy. She clearly raises her voice against the gender politics, patriarchal system of the society and the religious sanctions, which transforms women into the secondary 'objects'. Women are most affected by the dictates of narrow religious and cultural practices, which propagate gender bias and support patriarchy. The novel includes an unbiased viewing of gender politics in the patriarchal, fundamental Parsi and Muslim societies in Pakistan. Sensitivity to gender in feminist criticism, according to Madhumalati Adhikari, "involves an interpretation of a discourse based on inarticulation, misinterpretation, compression, euphemism, understatement and circuitousness."² According to her, the women's fiction because of these special characteristics becomes "too high for patriarchal hearing mechanism."³ A close study and interpretation of 'An American Brat' clearly reveals that it is very much sensitive to gender.

The novel opens with Zareen's deep concern over her daughter, Feroza, behaving unParsi like under the influence of Islamic fundamentalism. Zareen wants her daughter to be modern; but the father under the patriarchal influence does not see anything wrong in Feroza's growing conservatism. He contradicts his wife's opinion about the dresses Feroza should wear. He says, "I'd much prefer she stays

narrow-minded and decently dressed than go romping about looking fast and loose" (p.12). Actually this is the taunt he directs at his wife who wears short and sleeveless blouses. Zareen is angry but would not surrender to her husband's indirect control. She angrily replies,

"It's okay for you to run around getting drunk every evening, but I must stop wearing sleeveless blouses. ... If you think I'm going to cater to this ... this *mullah*-ish mentality of yours, you're mistaken," and looking down at him she orders, "Get out of my bed, you *mullah*!" (p.13).

Women suffer from this mentality of their men, but also of their habit of drinking in the parties as well. In the parties, since the men didn't drink after dinner, the food was served late—around midnight. The "resentful wives sustained themselves on juices, sodas, and soup until then. Like Zareen they felt they were forced to chaperone their men on an endless round of evening binges" (p.12). This is the age-old tradition, still in existence, in the patriarchal societies, that women take their meals only after their husbands have eaten. This tradition confirms the role of a husband as a breadwinner who should have the meal ahead of the woman.

Living in the patriarchal dominance, Feroza would not be able to act in the school play as, she knows her father, "won't like it" (p.16). It is because, Feroza's father would not like to "have his daughter fool around with Muslim boys—or any other boys" as he knows "the way the men talked about women ... talked about bold girls who acted in college plays" (p.17). Being a father of an unmarried girl of sixteen, he is very watchful, as he is aware of her being "more sexually ripe" and knows how it is "hard to keep young girls as innocent as one might wish" (p.17). The practice to keep the girls innocent from knowledge of sex is a conspiracy that was practised by the entire society to keep its girls ridiculously 'innocent'. This innocence had a high market value in the selection of a bride. Bapsi Sidhwa shows the disparity in the treatment given to the boys and the girls and the social and family outlook regarding this.

Though Feroza's family is quite progressive in their behaviour, her grandmother does not think it proper "to visit a married daughter day after day" (p.35). This is another age-old tradition, which emphasizes the gender difference that limits the access of the parents to their married daughters' home. This social practice also enhances the importance of the male child to the female one as an offspring.

Despite the modern outlook of the Parsi community, the issue of female education is treated with complacency. All Parsi boys, "by virtue of their demanding roles as men"(p.39), were expected by the community to become businessmen, engineers, doctors, accountants, stockbrokers and scientists etc., but very ironically, women were not expected to do anything significant. Bapsi Sidhwa sarcastically comments:

Not being burdened with similar expectations, the girls were not required to study abroad. If they persisted, and if the family could afford it, they might be affectionately indulged. It was also expedient sometimes to send them to finishing schools in Europe, either to prepare them for or divert them from marriage (p.39).

Marriage, children, family and happy domestic life are considered to be the goal in woman's life. Woman's career, her desire and aspiration have no place in this system of patriarchy. The blessings showered on Feroza, before her departure to America, highlight the same age-old expectation of a woman. "May you marry a rare diamond among men. May you have many children and become a grandmother and a great-grandmother, and live in contentment and happiness with all your children" (p.46). It is the blessing offered by Khutlibai, the grandmother, and one may not feel surprised. But one may feel so when the progressive mother of the protagonist who sends her to America to get the "puritanical rubbish out of (Feroza's) head" (p.14), also showers the similar blessing on her daughter afterwards. It is: "May you go laughing-singing to your in-law's home soon; may you enjoy lots and lots

of happiness with your husband and children" (p.234). Marriage seems to be the ultimate goal, conditioned as these women are by their cultural and patriarchal heritage. "Woman's contentment and happiness as per the traditional ideology must be epitomized through children, home and family. It was not expected that they would dare to look beyond the parameters set by patriarchy...."⁴ Though the Parsis are considered to be modern in outlook, because of the impact of Hindu and Muslim communities and cultures on the Parsi community, the female subordination for Parsi women acquired societal force. Women are known only in relation to men and wifedom confers a respectable status on women. With motherhood a woman reaches the summit of her existence.

In the purdah dominated societies the women have to restrain their movement in public. In such condition even the natural act of laughing attracts lewd gazes of men. They are made aware from their childhood that laughing in front of male or at public place is against female modesty. The girls, aware of this restraint, come to see off Feroza at the airport "giggled, nervously remembering to restrain their improper merriment, aware of the eyes attracted like magnets..." (p.48). Segregation of sexes makes men to be attracted towards women. In patriarchal society again the girls are expected to keep their gaze down and hence the advice is given to Feroza before she leaves for America is, "Don't talk to strangers; and never, ever look into their eyes!" (p.50). The patriarchal attitude demands that the man should take care of the young girls or women in his charge whoever he may be. Manek, Feroza's maternal uncle and her host in America, when notices that Feroza have "grown into a woman—a desirable and passionate woman" at once understands that "he'd have to look out for her" (p.67).

When Feroza decides to study in America, her decision to stay in a far off country is opposed by her grandmother. She says, "Our elders used to say, keep the girls buried at home. Do you know your grandfather would not allow even our pigeons to stray? If one of the birds from our loft spent the night on another's roof, we'd have pigeon soup the next day. He'd have its throat slit!" (p.121) She seems to suggest that if Feroza strays from the "pre-determined path" she is supposed to be treated like the pigeons and later "Feroza's throat is metaphorically cut when she decides to choose a non-Parsi life partner. ... A woman's life partner is chosen by parental authority ...and Feroza's fate has been the same in this context. Feroza must destroy essential parts of herself in order to satisfy the controllers of gender politics."⁵

The girl's life partner is chosen by the parents, and they have to take care that nothing should insult the groom's family. They have to submit to the whims of the boy's family and indulge in flattery, as Aban's mother does. She says, "What use had her daughter for saris when she was getting such an educated and well-brought-up husband? ... But no jewel could compare with the diamond Aban was getting in the person of her handsome and educated bridegroom" (p.222).

Feroza desires to become economically independent before she marries. She thinks that if she can earn her living her husband will respect her more. Her mother is angry, "Respect you? Nobody'll marry you if you're too educated" (p.240). She reacts accordingly because "the prevailing sentiment inculcated in women finds the notion of independence as something alien. Financial dependence on man is natural to woman. Anything different is intolerable."⁶

The novel is deeply concerned with gender inequalities and oppressive practices under Islamic rule in Pakistan.

Sidhwa is strongly condemning the Haddood Ordinances and the Zina Ordinance introduced by General Zia. These were grossly unfair to women and often perpetuated crimes against them by enabling the male offenders to go free while the female victim was punished.⁷

The novel thus provides numerous incidents related to patriarchy and gender bias which turns women's role into unbearable servitude. Bapsi Sidhwa during the course of the narration, constantly and deliberately, attacks the system of gender discrimination. Through the voice of her protagonist she exposes the deep-rooted traditions and their futility.

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