

Epidermalization of Inferiority, Cultural Root(lessness) and Mimicry: Bapsi Sidhwa's *American Brat* in Focus

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Abstract

*This study explores the epidermalization of inferiority among diaspora communities as one of downsides of the oft-(ac)claimed globalized world. Focusing on the networks between home(lessness) and the spaces of residence as well as the trajectories of roots(lessness) and native culture, the research uses Frantz Fanon's concept of epidermalization of inferiority to carry out a textual analysis of Bapsi Sidhwa's *American Brat*. With postcolonial theoretical underpinnings as the lens, the study brings forth the processes and strategies that an immigrant from a formerly colonized community exploits in the pursuit of imitating the host culture for the sake of getting acceptance among the host community. While doing so, the protagonist runs the risk of disjuncting with her own culture and ends up becoming culturally rootless. Consequently, the protagonist transforms from being a Parsee Pakistani into a typical 'American brat' but fails to achieve an equal status in the host community. Following Fanon's concept, this qualitative study concludes that such blind imitation of the hegemon and desertion of one's own culture end up in gaining nothing but inferiority for the subject.*

Keywords: American Brat, Epidermalization of Inferiority, mimicry, postcolonial studies, Frantz Fanon

Introduction to the Study

Mimicry has been one of the main areas of debate in postcolonial scholarship. (Bhabha, 1984; Fanon, 1952; Olsen, 2019; Pezzarossi, 2014; McQuillan, 2002) Among several prominent theorists who contributed to the field, Frantz Fanon highlights manifestations of colonial psychology in French Algeria with relation to time and person, as well as the dislocation or desecration of culture in a victim of colonization. (Agathangelou, 2016; Whittle, 2015; Haddour, 2005; Lazarus, 1993) Explaining the colonized subject's propensity to be like the white colonizers, Fanon (1952) diagnoses this neurosis as a product of the epidermalization of inferiority, which is the internalization of the inferiority complex. This concept falls into the paradigm of the binary of colonizer and colonized, where the former approaches the colonized and

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poses their own culture and ideas superior to the latter's. (Radak, 2015; Lopez, 2015; Wang, 2009; Mirmasoumi & Roshnavand, 2014) Because of this strategy used by the colonizer, the colonized automatically moves away from their own culture and traditions and sometimes end up in totally demeaning it. Fanon (1952) speaks against this kind of mimicry and demands for a complete transformation of the colonized man. He writes in his book entitled *Black Skins White Masks* that even though the colonizers have left his country, they have badly damaged the pre-colonized culture and state in a way that it is impossible to adopt the previous indigenous culture. (Fanon, 1952) Due to the non-availability of a colonizer-free culture and tradition, the colonized feels at a loss and carries on with the colonizer's code of life, thus banishing himself into a state of identity crisis and confusion. (Fanon, 1952)

The process of mimicry is present in many literary productions, written by postcolonial writers like Mohsin Hamid in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* and Kamila Shamsi in *Burnt Shadows*. Bapsi Sidhwa is also one of those postcolonial authors who wrote about the impact of colonization. Her works revolve around the theme of partition and its aftermath. (Deb, 2011) The main characters are Parsee women, who are a true picture of a doubly colonized society. Sidhwa writes them to life by utilizing aspects like status, personality and sexuality. (Schlote, 2006) By keeping in mind the scenarios of her novels, various studies have been carried out with regard to feminism, education, nationalism, diaspora, religion and cultural diversity. (Williams, 2019; Ahn, 2019; Chambers, 2014; Allen, 1994; Bahri, 1999)

Postcolonial Studies and the Literary Responses to Colonialism

With the advent of the emerging Anglophone literature from the commonwealth countries, it becomes a problem to ascertain how such literature can be studied. (Bertens, 2017) In his essay *Colonial Criticism*, Achebe states that the universal standards have been reduced to mere European standards of literature, which is inflexible to other kind of literature. (Achebe, 1995) Even though there were works published by so many commonwealth writers, Postcolonial studies became a major breakthrough and established itself with the release of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). Many writers and critics wrote under the influence of the newly emerging branch of English literature. Critics and scholars defined Fanon as a passionate fighter holding on to a justified sense of anger. He believed that most of the religious, ethnic and separatists problems faced by the previously colonized nations is due to the former history of colonization. (Eromosele, 2020; Garcia, 2006; Diop, 2019;

O'Halloran, 2015) Moreover, Fanon states it explicitly that the only way to purge one's culture from colonial impact is through violence. (Fairchild, 1994; Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2012; Hwami, 2016; Verges, 1996; Flores-Rodríguez & Jordan, 2012) But it has always been interrupted by some other factors like the "national bourgeois" (Olorunsola & Vaitheswaran, 1970). Fanon regards these people as the "native faces of colonization" because through their means of influence, colonizers find their way to control the native population. He further explains that the colonizers will also utilize the middle class because they are a vulnerable spot in a capitalist society; therefore, the powerful will take them for themselves, stuff them with their own ideas and customs, and send them back as their own advocates into the colonized societies. (Fanon, 1952) Not just in literature the idea identity or self-reliability is questioned practically by researchers of other ethnic groups as well. (Irizarry & Raible, 2014; Alessandrini, 2010; Moore-Gilbert, 1996; Wright, 1975) This sense of feeling inferior or thinking that the colonizer's culture is better than one's own is regarded by Fanon as the epidermalization of inferiority. The colonized think that by mimicking the influential will bring them prestige, thus the colonized culture is left in the back. Same is the case with the bourgeois natives. They gain their prestige and honor by imitating the colonizer. (Al-Abbood, 2012; Abdi, 1999)

Bapsi Sidhwa's American Brat: The Novel in Brief

In her novel *American Brat*, Sidhwa tells the story of Feroza, a young Pakistani girl, who migrates to America. Sidhwa explores the American society and what it holds for the world. (Deb, 2011) The story begins when Zareen, Feroza's mother, packs her daughter off to America to protect her from the orthodox influence of the Pakistani society, and aims to make Feroza a modern girl. Zareen is under the impression that the liberal environment of the United States would have a positive effect on her daughter. This act of sending Feroza for a couple of months proves the fact that the Pakistani society, or a previously colonized society, still feels inferior to the American or the Western (colonizer) society, paving way for the idea that the new colonizer or hegemonic power is still considered superior. Zareen is of the idea that under the influence of the American society, Feroza will learn better ideas and customs but she gradually conforms to its traditions and customs leaving her previous identity as a Pakistani girl. Due to her adaption to the American society, Feroza can no longer go back to her country, and she remains in America forever, thus making herself an alien to her own people and also the people in the American society. This instance aligns to the idea of mimicry put forward by Franz Fanon (1952), who asserts that the colonized him/herself prefers

the ideals of the colonizer. The current study explores how this notion of staying abroad, leaving the indigenous culture and owning the culture of the developed West is a common idea amongst people in the South Asian society. (Ullah, 2015) Keeping in view the introduction above, this research endeavors to carry out a qualitative study of Sidhwa's *American Brat* with theoretical underpinnings from Fanon's idea of the epidermalization of inferiority to see how the character of Feroza undergoes a transformation from a typical Parsee Pakistani girl, with orthodox ideas, into a typical American girl.

Epidermalization of Inferiority and Sidhwa's *American Brat*

The novel *American Brat* opens with the mother Zareen fussing about the thought of her daughter being too narrow-minded and strict, sulking around and shutting herself in her room. Zareen argues with her husband, Cyrus that their daughter might turn into a total religious fanatic if she is not controlled on time. They finally arrive at the solution that they will send Feroza to visit her uncle Manek, an MIT student in America. The idea was strongly opposed by the grandmother Khutlibai, foreshadowing the fact that Feroza will no longer be an eligible bachelorette in the Parsee community. But Zareen puts aside all the gossips and sends her daughter to America. As time passed, Manek decides for his niece that Feroza will be better off with an America degree in management. Feroza agrees to this lucrative offer and she decides to stay, thus her choice affects her and turns her into a complete classic American girl.

Just like the opening of the story the first instance of mimicry comes up when Zareen insists her husband that Feroza should be sent to America and "get all this puritanical rubbish out of her head." (Sidhwa, 1994, p. 14) The colonized society deemed their own society to be inferior and for the progress of their daughter, the Ginwallas decide to send her to America. To arrange for the trip, Cyrus and Zareen contact Manek. The phone call itself is an example of how the uncle treats his niece, telling her to get over her "gora-complex" and try not to be a "Paki Third Worlder". After Feroza's flight to America, Feroza faces problems and harsh investigation by the immigration department. The whole incident specifies the power and authority the colonizer or the hegemon has over a trivial matter. Thus, making it absolute that to enter their country the colonized has to do far more than what was required. Even after Manek manages to control the situation, he later on scolds Feroza for being irrational and pointing to the fact that no powerful person would bother about the colonized's self-respect.

As Feroza's tour begins, her uncle keeps telling her which habits to adopt and which to avoid. He teases her on the fact for being a "desi" who does not shower regularly. "it's you," he said to Feroza, surprised. "You're the smelly desi." (Sidhwa, 1994, p. 74) He further retorts by stating that: "You don't even know what a deodorant is, and you want to make an atom bomb!" (Sidhwa, 1994, p. 77)

Manek in the novel is shown as a person who conceits on the idea that he knows more than his niece. He is the perfect example to which Fanon refers to as the bourgeois which are specially adopted by the colonizers to become their advocate. Manek's constant shaming and conceited attitude is evident. He keeps implanting the colonizers ideals into the young mind of the colonized. He calls her an illiterate because she keeps wasting her time, keeps staring, keeps eating whatever junk food that was offered, cuts short anyone while talking and falls for everyone only because they are nice, adding: "You have to learn that in America you don't get something for nothing." (Sidhwa, 1994, p. 82)

As the novel progresses, Feroza gets to meet a number of people who are special and different in their own way. But studying the novel from the perspective of a postcolonial reader and to be specific, mimicry, the new characters are more of an invitation to the colonizer's ideals and customs. Fanon warns about this strategy used by the hegemon to attract the colonized towards their own culture and therefore trashing the previous one of the colonized. One of the characters is Father Fibs who, by his wondrous talent of storytelling, enchants the young immigrants by depicting them as young flowers or birds. His words might be enticing and exhilarating but it's really a daydream for the colonized and no matter how much they would fly, they would be brought down by their racial inferiority. The speech given by Father Fib raises a desire in Feroza to stay in America and try her possibilities: "Might not she, too, wish to prove herself? Even if she was only a girl?" (Sidhwa, 1994, p. 98) From this point on wards the character Feroza begins her transformation from a Parsee Pakistani into an American Brat. Even Manek starts thinking that it would be the best option for Feroza to stay in America and begin her higher studies there. "How could she discover the opportunities and choices available to her in such a short time?" (Sidhwa, 1994, p. 119) After some thought by Zareen and Cyrus, Feroza is allowed to study at Twin Falls. Before she leaves, Manek tries his every best to teach her every valuable lesson he thinks is required. He constantly claims to be an American while being in America and if something does not happen right for you the path adopted might be wrong, "If you have to struggle, you're doing it wrong." (Sidhwa, 1994, p. 139) He even forbids her to follow her past traditions "but those people won't find it ethnic, they'll just puke."

(Sidhwa, 1994, p. 145) All this the process through which the colonized man goes through to adopt the colonizer's customs and fall properly into its ethos.

At Twin Falls, Feroza finally arrives to begin her new life as an American student. She gets a large, White and sullen faced roommate named Jo who would not say anything past a monosyllable at first. She struggles to keep her language as a perfect possible, but it still fell short to the surroundings in which she found herself, especially with Jo. The white girl became a huge influence on Feroza as time passed by. Jo makes her wear dresses which Feroza would not at first think of wearing, forces her to take up a job, and the constant use of swear words. Moreover, the most important influence which Jo had on Feroza was that she would take her out to meet boys in bars and restaurants. At first, Feroza felt guilty when she would go out but after a while, she felt that she was independent and she could perceive the opposite gender from a bolder and much confident perspective. Along with visiting bars, Feroza also took to drinking whenever alcohol was available. At one instance, Feroza was drunk enough to smoke a cigarette. Since she belonged to a Parsee family and worshipped fire, this act of smoking was a defiance to her religion. But after some time, it did not really affect her that she smoked or drank.

The idea, which Fanon (1952) describes is that the colonizers build their own ideology so big and powerful that it becomes useless to go against it. Feroza at first thought of her country to be at some standing before other countries, but after spending time in a foreign world, Feroza realizes that her country and culture holds no ground. At this point Feroza indulges herself completely into the American society as an individual and tries to be more American. Even Manek, upon visiting Pakistan for some time, argues with his relatives that the American system is suitable for every man and it should not be taken only for its face value. Manek acts again like a 'national bourgeois' who convinces his own people to follow the colonizer and its set pattern of life.

As the novel advances to the climax, we observe Feroza as a fully matured girl who is not scared of the American society anymore. She has become an integral part of it and has adopted all the makings of a typical American girl. She falls in love with a white Jew, David, and as the relationship develops Feroza intends to marry him. At this point Feroza glances back at her past and thinks that how far she has come. Fanon portrayed this idea several times that the individual will have to cut off his or her past culture to indulge in the ethos of the colonizer hence over here in American Brat, Feroza has finally become a typical American brat. "She wondered if she was the same girl who had lived in Lahore and gone to the Convent of the Sacred Heart." (Sidhwa, 1994, p. 264)

The news of the marriage outrages Zareen due to which she decides to come to America. She arrives with a plan to stop the marriage and avoiding the point where her daughter will become a non-parse by marrying outside faith. She at first pleads to the reason in her daughter but that was gone ages before. Then she turns to David and tries to coax him out of marriage by exaggerating different marriage rituals and customs. This tactic works on David and finally decides to back off from the marriage. This breaks down Feroza badly and she asks Zareen to leave. At the end of the novel we see Feroza as a total stranger to her own people and culture. She stays in America onwards and she feels lost at losing David and everything she ever had when she was a Parsee Pakistani: "Feroza wept, yearning for the land of poets and ghazals she had left behind, for her friends from the Convent of Sacred Heart, and for her own broken heart." (Sidhwa, 1994, p. 311)

Conclusion

To conclude this research, we can see that the character of Feroza has transformed from being a native Parsee Pakistani into a typical American girl; however, the consequences of this transformation were severe because Feroza loses all her love from her family and is deemed as an outsider at the end. Her loss of love and previous culture qualifies the facts, which are given by Fanon (1952) about the epidermalization of inferiority. It was due to this inferiority complex that led Feroza to this stage of heartbreak. The writer Bapsi Sidhwa has, time and again, said that the novel *American Brat* is a novel of self-development (bildungsroman), but in this research the main character cannot bring herself to be completely like the colonizer, thus proving the whole desire and subsequent attempt to be like the colonizers an effort in futile. Complete mimicry of the foreign culture is an impossibility.

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