

“Speaking in Tongues”: Conceptualizing Femininities in Sidhwa’s *An American Brat*

Ms. Sana Imtiaz

BahaudinZakariya University
English Language Center
Multan, Pakistan

Prof. Dr. SaiqaImtiazAsif

BahaudinZakariya University
English Language Center
Multan, Pakistan

Abstract

Sidhwa’s novel An American Brat is significant because it unveils the diasporic identities of the women, in contrast with the traditional gender roles of the women in Pakistan. Interestingly, the novel problematizes the concept of the fixed identity, indicating the valences of the representations of the women in the novel. Critically analyzing these multiple feminine representation, the study analyses the responses of the marginalized, when incorporated with the center. The paper analyzes the novel using the model of Pessar and Mahler (2003) concluding that Sidhwa has presented the multiple representations of women of color, in contrast with the fixed, monolithic colonial representations, which render them incapable of reacting to the oppression. Such fixed politicized representations result from power relations and are highly motivated.

Key Words: Diaspora, Femininities, Postcolonial theory, Sidhwa, Power, Gendered Geographies of Power, Parsee, Pakistani English Literature

1. Introduction

Pessar and Mahler (2003) note that the women of color are almost invisible in the literature on migration resulting in little or no representation of their lived experience. Despite the minimal representations of gender issues, the women migrate almost at the same rate as men (Pessar and Mahler: 2003). Their experience stands out as it depicts the process of assimilation and alienation, not only from the transnational perspective but also from the perspective of gender. The novel “An American Brat” is significant because it unveils the experiences of the Feroza, a Pakistani girl, belonging to Parsee community, shifted to the United States by her family to make her modern in approach and outlook. The novel initiated a heated debate in Pakistan because of its problematic representation of the protagonist, Feroza, who is having multiple identities, which challenges the representations of a fixed identity of the women of color.

Furthermore, her marginalization takes place at various levels, so she exercises agency reciprocally in multiple ways. Representations of multiple identities, originating from positioning in a variety of social and cultural milieu problematizes the concept of fixed colonial representation of the women of color as “oppressed.” On the contrary, the women in the novel are seen as exercising agency using various strategies. Furthermore, the experience of diaspora can be seen both as empowering, as well as disempowering for the women of color in the novel. Hence, the novel warrants further analysis of its thematic conventions. Henderson (1993) notes that the women writers of diasporan literature create a heteroglossia, a dialectic between the colonizer and the colonized. They seemed to be “speaking in tongues,” a characteristic of the diasporan literature that we chose as the title of our paper. The characteristic is significant as it destabilizes the boundaries between “us” and “them” resulting in the empowerment of the marginalized.

2. Theory

According to George (1996) the term “diaspora” is not restricted to the experience of the Jews outside their homeland, rather it characterizes the experience of millions of expatriates outside their native country. Diasporan literature has global reach rather than being limited to the national or ethnic level. It is because of the fact that the identity of the individuals cannot be located within the so called “national literatures” for every new nation created, there will be a few people outside the borders, hence, resulting in diaspora. Furthermore, the diasporan literature cannot be read as a homogenous whole, rather each diasporan writing deserves individual critical reading.

Nelson (cited in George: 1996) speculates that there are “*shared diasporic sensibilities*” and “*common thematic concerns*” that invoke similar responses from the writers. Consequently, some of the issues dealt in diasporan literature are common, such as “*issues of identity, problem of history, confrontations with racism, intergenerational conflicts, difficulties in building new supportive communities*” (p.182) However, each marginalized group has got its indigenous experience which needs representation and critical reception.

To analyze the representation of women of color as the marginalized subject, we will use the model of *Gendered geographies of power* given by Pessar and Mahler(2003). The framework consisted of three fundamental aspects of *geographic scales, social locations* and *power geometries*. Geographic scale refers to the multiple social and spatial domains (the body, the family, the state) across which the power relations between men and women are created. Social locations refer to a person’s position in the society resulting from his/her ethnicity, gender, historical, socio-cultural factors which bring him/her certain advantages and disadvantages. The third aspect of the model is power geometries, referring to the types and degree of agency, people exert resulting from their social and geographic locations. Furthermore, the model analyses the individual attributes of exercising power and how they vary within the people from their same socio-political group. We will then focus on the symbolism used in the novel to highlight the concept of diaspora and hybridity as perceived and presented by Sidhwa. The discussion complements the debate on the representations of the gendered experience of diaspora, as it highlights how the women of color perceive their experience of diaspora and how their sensibilities are shaped by it.

3. Writing from the Margins- Diasporan Literature

According to Clifford(1994), diaspora is associated “..with the idea of particular sentiments towards the homeland, whilst being formed by those of the place of settlement. This place is one where one is constructed in and through difference, and yet is one that produces differential forms of cultural accommodation or syncretism: in some versions, hybridity.” The work of diasporan critics culminated in the definition given by Clifford (1994) whose focus is on the destabilizing identities resulting from diaspora. The territorial shift results in the cultural shift which necessarily results in the overlapping identities of the individuals and groups. Furthermore, diaspora refers to a holistic process involving political, economic and cultural dimensions at various levels, which exists in the context of globalization.

Diasporic communities aim at being similar as well as different from the host cultures. It results in hybridization and syncreticity. What is significant about this hybrid identity is the fact that it critiques the concept of the nation state as one coherent group. Rather, it promotes the concept of trans-national and trans-ethnic identity.

“Whatever their ideologies of purity, diasporic cultural forms can never in practice be nationalist. They are deployed in transnational networks built from multiple attachments, and they encode practices of accommodation with, as well as resistance to, the host countries, and their norms.” (p. 307)

Commenting on the diasporic consciousness, Clifford (1994) believed that it could be created positively as well as negatively. It can be created negatively through discrimination and exclusion, for example, discriminating between the groups of people on the basis of race which results in providing them with opportunities of insufficient income. According to Clifford (1994), marginalization on the basis of race and economic backgrounds can result in formation of new coalitions among groups. Diasporic consciousness can alternately be created positively through identification with world historical cultural/political forces such as Africa and China. The process is concerned with feeling global. Diasporic experience, according to Clifford (1994) makes the best out of bad situations.

Looking at diaspora from the perspective of gender, Clifford (1994) believed that when diaspora is viewed in terms of displacement, instead of replacement, the experiences of men predominate. On the contrary, the women’s experience of diaspora is more revealing, seeing it as a condition of postmodernity. The migrant women can favor the experience of diaspora as it offers them better opportunities of Education, health and earning. Nevertheless, the connection with home and a particular ethnic or religious identity can be privileged by the immigrant women as it ensures better possibilities of exercising agency. Brah (1996) believes that the concept of diaspora should be understood after comparing various diasporan experiences as they shape identity, subjectivity and social relations. Hence, diaspora is not a fixed reality, rather it keeps on fluctuating and changing. Furthermore, the concept of diaspora focuses on the “homing” desire instead of a “homeland” desire. The two concepts are different because not all the diasporas focus on returning back to the home. Aiming at a holistic understanding of diasporic experience,

Brah (1996) suggests that diaspora, as an analytical construct should not only be seen as a journey made by an individual, rather the questions like where, when and how a person travels? should also be considered. Furthermore, while comparing various diaporas, their points of similarity as well as differences should be considered in terms of power relations. For example, South Asian diaspora, does not necessarily be similar for the South Asian immigrants in U.K, USA or other countries. The points of similarity, according to Brah (1996) should be created on the basis of how, where and when the subject and object positions are created.

“The concept of diaspora centers on the configurations of power which differentiate diasporas internally as well as situate them in relation to one another.” (p. 183)

Brah (1996) also asserts that the concept of diaspora can further be understood on the basis of how various modalities, such as gender, race, class, religion and language can play a role in marginalizing the other. Furthermore, the various modalities have different points of intersections such as a feminine representation may be racialised or shows various social classes, hence, creates an indigenous diasporic experience. Brah (1996) focuses on the question of representation which can make a majority, a minority or a minority can become a majority. The multi-axial concept of power problematizes the notion of majority/minority, and a group constructed as a majority on one axis can be called a minority on the other axis.

Lashgari (1995) speculates that the women’s voice of resistance in postcolonial literature is characterized by the following features: Decentring, heteroglossia, dialogics and travesia. Decentring refers to new subject and object positions in the discourse generated by the postcolonial writers. The marginalized make the margin, the centre becomes the margin, hence challenging the meta-narrative of the colonizer. Displacement, hence, becomes a tool through which, the de-centred subjects talk about the points of similarity between “self” and “the other.” Heteroglossia, or multiple discourses frees the monologue from its absolute truth. When the marginalized talk back, certain realities which are taken for granted are unraveled and replaced. Dialogics refer to the discourse of conflict, when the similarities between confronting discourses are compromised. Its result is travesia, which refers to the concept of “crossing”- a form of transgression. It implies two aspects. Locating the self on a known as well as unknown position and questioning the familiar position of the self, which has been essentialized through social conditioning.

JanMohamed (1985) notices that the power structure established by the colonial discourse is “Manichean” in nature. He believes that the dichotomies (good/ evil, black/white etc.) are structured along the fixed lines. The colonized is seen by colonizer either as his demonized or idealized image, or as a resource to be taken up and used for propagating the colonization. Jameson (2010) in his discussion on the hybridization in cinematic representations postulate that inserting the American protagonists, the cowboys into the Balkan landscape in the movie *Dust* is an example of hybridization, a process which results in creating identities, counterpoint to the ones traditionally constructed in the idiom of the colonizer. Trinh T. Minha (1989) in her essay “Woman, Native and Other” believes that the female postcolonial writers are prompt to hide their creative work as they are regarded as language stealers. Problematizing the concept of the colonized, they tend to un feminize themselves by speaking out, hence sharing the characteristics of the colonizer. The shared space of the colonizer and the colonized results in empowerment of the colonized.

Frederic Jameson (1988) believes that post modernism results in the blurring of some of the key boundaries of high and popular culture. The culture of the upper class mingles up with that of the middle class culture; disabling the hierarchies of upper class and lower class. The migrants particularly are an example of such phenomenon, as their identities consists of multiple layers. Pennycook (2007) believes that through the transgression of global boundaries, the cultural forms also move, change and shape the identities of people. Hence, music, language and identities are not fixed, rather they are fluid and keep on changing. Taking the notion of hip hop culture, he looks at the ways in which the globalization has challenged the standards of culture and accepted codes regarding gender, sexuality and religion. Henderson (1994) notes that the Black American women writing is characterized by a dialogue with the other as well as a dialogue with the aspects of other within the self. Referring to Bakhtin’s notion of dialogicisms, Henderson (1994) mentions that each social group speaks in its own social dialect which intersects with each other, forming a heteroglossia of shared languages and values. Hence, the writings of the women of color stand out by the virtue of representing fluid identities which necessarily constitute the aspects of the otherness within the self. Mitra (1995) notices that one of the characteristic features of the heteroglossia of identities is visible in the shift from silence to the speaking.

The speaking out, as a form of resistance, becomes possible only because of the intervention of the colonizer. Henderson(1994) adds to the debate by noting that the representations of identities from the vantage point of the insider as well as outsider to the culture of the colonizer result in the empowerment and deep insight into the power politics inherent in the social structures. Sidhwa's novel *An American Brat* is significant because it highlights the multiple representations of her female characters in general and Feroza in particular. Locating her female characters in the positions of power and subjugation, she challenges the fixed monolithic identities of women of color. Diaspora is the backdrop against which such representations of female characters are shaped, in comparison and contrast with the femininities in the Pakistani culture. In the next section, I will use the model of Gendered Geographies of Power (Pessar and Mehlar: 2003) focusing on the three scales of *geography*, *social locations* and *power geometries*. I will also take into consideration Sidhwa's notions of diaspora as it is exhibited implicitly or explicitly in the novel, unveiling how the gender is constructed across cultures.

4.1. Geographic Scales

Sidhwa introduces her protagonist Feroza's identity from multiple geographical spatial locations of Pakistan and America. These locations often demand contrasting codes of conduct resulting in often hybrid and conflictual tendencies among the individuals in diaspora. Sidhwa subtly points out these contrasting tendencies by juxtaposing or overlapping them. The first attribute of femininity in American diasporais hard work. The gendered subaltern has to work to exercise agency:

“The first lesson you learn in America is ‘you don't get something for nothing,’ Manek said. “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.” (p.124)

Manek teaches her that the women can't rely on anyone but themselves, if they want to survive in America. In Pakistan, the women are dependent on their menfolk, but Feroza learnt to be self-dependent, when Manek left her alone in the museum:

“This taught you more about America than six months of pampering. You'll see, you'll gain confidence. You can't rely on anyone but yourself if you want to live in this country-not even on me.” (p.135)

Pessar and Messlar (2003) are of the view that the state plays a decisive role in disseminating the social constructs among the migrants, in keeping with its economic philosophy and ideology. Manek concludes his lecture on “work” by tracing its roots in capitalist and democratic society of America. The body and the ethics related to proxemics are also shaped by the *Geographic Scales*. Feroza believes that people will stare if she is physically close to Manek, as is a custom in Pakistan. The reality is exactly the opposite, as America offered much wider space for socialization among genders. Furthermore, smiling to someone who is not a blood relation, belonging to the opposite sex, is quite offensive in Pakistani society but a courtesy in America.

The geography also operates within everyday tasks such as opening a carton or a plastic bag. American diaspora confers comfort and ease over such minor tasks in the lives of gendered subalterns, distinguishing their experience across borders:

“And each time, Manek saw Feroza wrestle with a jar or juice bottle or tamper proof vial, he said, “Remember this: If you have to struggle to open something *in America*, you're doing it wrong. They've made everything easy. That's how a free economy works..”(p.140, our emphasis)

The appropriate modes of communication result in empowerment. Feroza, being a transnational gendered subaltern, is unable to communicate in the socially accepted code, which she learns later from Jo. “*It was almost like learning a new language, and both sometimes wondered if the other knew enough English.*” (p.149) It brings us back to the notion of shared heteroglossia being developed within the two women, who are representatives of two different cultures. Under the influence of Jo, Feroza learns to use abusive language, which she otherwise would not use in Pakistan.

“Jo's extraordinary capacity for expletives, which matched her other appetites soon had Feroza saying “shit” and “ass hole” with an abandon that epitomized for her the heady reality of her being abroad, away from home, and even if she knew it was an illusion, a sense of control over her actions.” (p.159)

Pessar and Mahler (2003) are of the view that immigrant women hold various social locations in a society, which either results in their empowerment or their exploitation. Living in Pakistani society, culturally and socially, the women are not supposed to answer back the men in the same coin, doing the opposite to the accepted code resulted in Manek's embarrassment.

Ferozahad kicked a man in his private parts for trying to be intimate with her in Lahore; narrating the event in front of Manek and his friend was embarrassing for Manek, as well as Feroza. Zubair (2006) notes in her research in Southern Punjab that the women preferred the life of celibacy because it brought them socially advantageous positions resulting from their family's support. However, in United States, the women exercise agency by being independent about their sexuality. Other than sharing the working space, the boundaries between public and private life are also blurred. The women of color in American diaspora, have to learn to work within and outside the four walls of their homes. Jo cooks and keeps the apartment in excellent condition. She also works and earns for herself. The overlapping identities of women of color demand different reactions in different situations. Feroza, being a member of Parsee community considered herself polluted on smoking for the first time; the transgression of boundaries- bringing *Ahura Mazda* near her mouth demanded a ritual of purification. However, the incident proved the one in the series of many such transgressions characteristic of diaspora.

Sidhwa's genius lies in the fact that she represents American geography, as not a homogenous whole, rather it is a combination of various ideologies which vary from one state to another state. The valences of social life resulting from geographies also affect the experience of the women of color across borders. Manek tells Feroza that if she gets admission in Birmingham Young University in the Salt Lake City, she would not be allowed to drink or engage in premarital sex. She would also not be allowed to wear bikinis or shorts. Hence, the geographies shape the politics of body, modes of socialization and orientations towards sex. It is this fluidity and hybridity, which makes it acceptable for the anxious family of Feroza in Pakistan. Manek writes them a letter about Mormon values in state Idaho, where Feroza was getting admission, concluding that the *state* did not allow the women to engage in premarital sex or consume alcohol or even caffeine, which ultimately convinces her parents. Feroza's assimilation in the American culture is marked by her discussions with Manek and Jo about cultural orientations towards time, money, life and education, highlighting how Pakistani culture is "the other" to the American culture. It also challenges some of the myths associated with the femininities in Pakistani culture, in comparison with American culture. The representations are significant because they highlight the lived experience of the gendered immigrant affected by the geography and economy of America.

4.2. Social Locations

Exploring the lived experience of the gendered subaltern in diaspora, Pessar and Mahler (2003) are of the view that belonging to a society demands a code of conduct to be followed by the individuals. Displacement from the homeland results in variable social and cultural practices, resulting in hybridity. The postcolonial writers juxtapose the culture of the homeland and diaspora, initiating a dialogue between the two cultures. Locating gender in this framework, Pessar and Mahler (2003) believe that understanding the orientations towards sexuality across cultures can be an important step in unveiling how the gender is constructed in diaspora. Furthermore, the decision of the immigrant women to stay or to return to their homeland, results directly or indirectly from the orientations towards sexuality. In his section, I will focus my analysis on the orientations towards sexuality, imagined and real, across the borders in the novel. I will also hint at the causes of Feroza's decision to stay abroad.

The orientations towards sexuality greatly vary across Pakistani and American soils. Located in Pakistan, Feroza felt embarrassed when Zareen came to pick her up in a sleeveless blouse. Being in America, she refused to show her legs and kept on covering her body. Sexuality of women in the Islamized society of Pakistan is the property of the state which, if not carefully guarded, can wreak the smooth functioning of the society (Mernissi:1987) Initially, Feroza, conditioned according to Pakistani society, exercised a self-imposed control over her sexuality. The tendency resulted in her orientations towards homosexuality and home-sickness. Furthermore, the women in America saw heterosexual love and marriages as means of propagating patriarchal oppression. Feroza tells her mother that her room-mates are lesbians because they can't stand the heartache of break-ups with their boyfriends:

“Some women just prefer women. Others are fed up. American boys change girlfriends every few months. All boys are not like my David. The girls can't stand the heartache. It takes them months to get over it. Laura says: “If Shirley gets my juices flowing, why should I mess around with boys?” (p.300)

American society offers the sexual liberty to the women, enabling them to be the decision makers about their sexual lives. Transgressing the limits imposed by the Islamized Pakistani culture and Zia's regime, Feroza saw sexual liberty as a form of empowerment. Mernissi (1987) observes that the gratification of the sexual desire results in balanced individuals with a constructive approach towards society.

“Ever since, Feroza had met David and bought his car, every atom of her being seemed weightless, and the very air she moved in was buoyant, and with every breath she inhaled happiness.” (p.255)

Besides representing the sexual liberty as a source of empowerment, Sidhwa alternatively presents it as a confusing and guilt ridden experience for the women of color. Holland et al.(1998) notice that the women sometimes develop conflictual and hybrid identities, as a result of contrasting social and cultural tendencies across time and space. Mernissi (1987) adds to the debate by noticing that one of the challenges posed by modernity is sexual anomie- a period of deep confusion and absence of norms. Modernity encourages sexual liberty, the accepted norms dictate otherwise. Consequently, a deep confusion and guilt arises in the minds of the youth, who are conditioned by the social code of ethics promoting sexual segregation, but are involved in dating and extra-marital sex. When Feroza falls in love with David, she was overwhelmed by the guilt of her actions. The scenario is significant as it shows how gender is shaped by social, psychological, historical and geographical.

“To be able to see David, whenever she wanted to, at odd times of the night and early in the morning, to cook together over the weekends, to discover each other’s endearing peculiarities and the odd unexpected moments when each looked most seductive to the other, did amount to living together. Feroza was driven by the bouts of guilt. Once, when she was sneaking back into her room at three o’clock in the morning, with her shoes in the hand, she wondered if she was the same girl, who had lived in Lahore and gone to the Convent of the Sacred Heart.” (p.264)

Being located in Lahore regulated her sexuality by attaching the concept of honor with it. Rehman (2002) notices that traditionally the concept of *izzat*, honor and *asmat* are associated with women in Pakistani culture. The practice is in contrast with the American culture where no such concept exists. Manek tells Feroza on her way out of the Kennedy Airport, “*You’d better forget this honor-shonor business. Nobody bothers about that here.*” Pessar and Mehler (2003) are of the view that the orientations towards sexuality vary not only across social and ethnic backgrounds but also according to the time period governed by historical changes. Zareen complains that she could cycle to her college wearing frocks and skirts in 1959 and 1960 and her daughter is denied that liberty in 1978. *Hudood* Ordinance imposed in 1980s made the situation even graver, as it made no distinction between adultery and rape, legally protecting the sexual exploitation of the women. Sidhwa highlights the plight of several women afflicted by the *Hudood* Ordinance, Safia Bibi, being one of them:

“Safia Bibi’s father in bringing the charges against her assailant, had been unwittingly trapped by the Zina Ordinance. It required the testimony of four “honorably” male eye-witnesses or eight female eye-witnesses to establish rape. The startled women who had enjoyed equal witness status under the previous law realized that their worth had been discounted by fifty percent.” (p.236-237)

Khutli Bai was of the view that in her times, even the strayed pigeons were slain, so Feroza should not be sent abroad. By virtue of being born in the era immediately after Bhutto’s socialist regime, Feroza gets the chance to go the United States. Pessar and Mehler (2003) are of the view that the migrant families lay special emphasis on the chastity of their daughters but the sons are allowed to indulge in premarital sex. Furthermore the marriage should be made within the community. Khutli Bai opposes Feroza’s getting education abroad because Manek, being a man can indulge in pre-marital sex but the stakes on the chastity of the daughter are high. When Manek returns from America, Jeroo declares that he wants his teenage son Dara, to get the foreign education but marry the girl of their community:

“I told my Dara and I am telling him again, in front of all of you, Jeroo declared, showing the pale palms of her hands and speaking in English, “When he goes for foreign education, he can have whatever fun he wants. But when he wants to marry, it must be to a Zarathusti.” (p.203)

When Feroza decides to marry David, Zareen herself flows to the United States to stop such an act of transgression. Although she succeeds in her mission, yet Feroza decides to stay in the United States, as diaspora offered better possibilities of empowerment to the women. Diasporic literature is significant as one of its important themes is whether the immigrants like to return to their homeland or not. Pessar and Mahler (2003) are of the view that the immigrant women develop strategies consistent with long term or permanent settlement abroad while men adopt strategies which connect them more closely to their homelands resulting in their permanent return there, sometime in future. These opposite orientations depict that the women feel that their social status improves post migration, while men feel the opposite.

Manek gets married to a Parsee girl, as a strategy of maintaining a link with her homeland, besides the fact that he had an American girlfriend and felt attracted towards Jo, because of her white skin and confident manners. Feroza felt that she would not go back to Pakistan as it fails to offer abundance of commodities and comforts, as it exists in America.

“Like Manek, she had become used to the seductive entitlements of the First World. Happy Hours, telephones that worked, the surfeit of food, freezers, electricity, and clean and abundant water, the malls, sky scrapers and high ways.” (p.312)

Pessar’s study on Guatemala refugees (cited in Pessar and Mahler: 2003) brings out that the women start questioning their exploitation in their hometowns and the state’s “official truth”, once they get aware of their rights by interacting with international agencies and NGOs working in refugee camps. Similarly, Feroza felt that she could not return to Pakistan because she can’t cope up with *Hudood* Ordinance or the exploitation by the state. The desire of privacy and thirst of knowledge are other reasons for not returning to Pakistan. Feroza felt that she needs a personal space for being independent about her life. Feroza is aware of the paradoxes of the New World, i.e. its selling of lethal weapons, but she believes that her experience of dislocation is shared by many other immigrants. Pursuit of the happiness by the individual becomes the ultimate aim of the immigrants. Hence, the women of color prefer to stay in the U.S.

Challenging the concept of exotic maidens, as it is propagated in colonial discourse (Said: 1978), Sidhwa presents multiple orientations towards love, marriage and sexuality, held by the women of color. The decisions about their sexual lives stem from the various layers of identities of the women of color in diaspora. Sidhwa’s genius lies in the fact that she presents the women in object position, when she unveils their sexuality. The agency exercised by such women becomes a key factor in their decision of staying abroad. Consequently, the women of color are seen as valuing their freedom and empowerment, which operates through power geometries established through cultural constructs.

4.3. Power Geometries

Power Geometries, as mentioned earlier, refers to how the women of color exercise agency, when alternatively located, geographically and socially, in host country and in native country. Sidhwa, instead of dichotomizing subjectivity and objectivity, brings out how the boundaries blur and how the colonizer becomes the colonized in various contexts. Taking Foucault’s notion of power as an intricate web (1976), she subtly points out how the women exercise agency through their geographical and social locations. Feroza decides to stay in the U.S, instead of going back to her country, because she believed that it is empowering for her. She refused to talk to Manek about Jo’s socialization and drinking habits because she didn’t want to be removed from this process of empowerment.

“Feroza longed to talk to Manek about her roommate but was afraid. He might be upset and move her from Twin Falls before her initiation into the mysterious rites of Jo’s way of life was complete. Feroza, nothing if not inquiring, realized she was going through a rare and unusually enlightening experience. And she was as loath to abandon the challenge, daily unraveling new and unexpected insights, as any of her intrepid and fierce eyed foremothers would have been.”

Massey (cited in Pessar and Mahler, 2003) is of the view that the immigrants value their experience of immigration as it confers upon them more rights than otherwise available in their native country. Referring to Brennan’s study on Dominican sex workers, Pessar and Mahler (2003) exemplify the concept of power geometry by reporting the cause of Dominican women having sex with men from German origin i.e. to find a husband and the visa of Europe. In the novel, Feroza wanted to assimilate in the American culture by dating with the men, so that she could avail of all the freedom and opportunities offered by virtue of being an American. Manek presents before her vast opportunities resulting from assimilating in the Western culture.

Pessar and Mahler (2003) are of the view that the immigrants exercise agency and power by manipulating the rules and legislatures, wherever and whenever they get a chance. Manek takes Feroza for the dinner in a posh restaurant but leaves without paying by lodging a complaint against the quality of the steak served. The benefit of being located in America confers all the rights reserved for the customers on Manek, which he exploits. He explains it as “skimming from the system”:

“You’ve got to skim what you can off the system, otherwise the system will skin you. I learned this the hard way,” said Manek, the sage. “After the accident, I had only the tuition money.”

Hardly any insurance. It would have taken our family seven generations to pay the hospital bills. It taught me many things..." (p.144)

Jo exercises similar form of agency when she goes out with Feroza. Shoplifting, a taboo in Pakistani culture, is a mode of convenience, a form of necessary skill to exercise agency:

"Going to the moll with Jo was a hair rising experience. She was a slick thief. Jo seldom bought or let Feroza buy necessities. Toothpaste, shampoo, chocolates, razors, lotions, ballpoint pens were purloined as and when required. She occasionally paid for or made Feroza pay for a bag of potato chips or some item too bulky to be easily lifted." (P.153)

The foreignness of Feroza necessitated her speedy assimilation in the Western culture; its various stages can alternately be seen as the systematic empowerment. Conventions of discourse, in the first place, must be learnt by the transnational women of color. Jo teaches Feroza to say "motha-fuka", "may-nayze," and "Gimme a soda" to avoid her embarrassment and to support her assimilation in the American culture. Similarly, being appropriately dressed up is also a form of agency exercised by Feroza. She packed all her Pakistani outfits and dangling earrings and replaced them with pairs of jeans, sweaters, blouses and shirts. "*You don't have to always tell the truth, y' know! Or you can't talk like that. They'll stomp all over you.*"(151) Under Jo's advice, she learns to manipulate facts to exercise power.

Sidhwa highlights the agency exercised by the Feroza, even in the social scenario where apparently Jo is in the position of power and authority. The "directionality of the flow," borrowing Pessar and Mahler's terminology (2003) fluctuates between Feroza and Jo:

"If Jo had influenced Feroza, Feroza had, without either of them being conscious of it, influenced Jo. Manek had found Jo much more amiable at their second meeting and didn't get the impression that he was being slighted as often." (p.155)

The agency is also exercised by discouraging the gendered division of labor in America. The whole family as a unit is supposed to work equally:

"Husband and wife both work. Every minute is organized. A wife will say, "Dear, put the clothes in the washing machine and come back in ten minutes to take our son to the baseball practice. I'll be back from the grocery store in thirty minutes to put the clothes in dryer and take our daughter for ballet lessons." (p.124)

The tendency is in contrast with Pakistani social milieu, where women are supposed to stay within the four walls of their homes, their work mostly limited to the household, and men, in the position of breadwinners. Unveiling the ideoscopes of freedom and sexual liberty, resulting from migration, Sidhwa also presents the dislocation and alienation of the migrants. She does not present diaspora as "the solution" to the problem, rather one of the opportunities available for the empowerment.

5. Sidhwa's notion of Diaspora and Hybridity

McClintock (1994) describes the Hybrid State exhibit on Broadway, as a space well lit and broad, in contrast with the tight passage signaling colonialism.

"To enter colonial space, you stoop through a low door, only to be closed in another black space- a curatorial reminder, however fleeting of Fanon: "The native is being hemmed in." But the way out of colonialism, it seems, is forward. A second white word POSTCOLONIALISM, invites you through a slightly larger door into the next stage of history, after which you emerge, fully erect, into the brightly lit and noisy hybrid state." (p.291)

The representation of hybridity, using the symbolism of architecture, is significant because it reflects positivity associated with hybridity- hybridity is not usurpation of the rights of the colonizer as a result of globalization, rather an emergence of a new form of culture shared by the colonizer, which results in the empowerment of the colonized. Sidhwa is not judgmental about the concept of hybridity, rather, "speaking in the tongues" she presents different viewpoints associated with diaspora and hybridity. The greatness of Sidhwa as an artist lies in the fact that she offers multiple perspectives of diaspora, making it more open for a postmodernist, rather than the postcolonial reading. The technique of symbolism is used in this regard, as symbols can be interpreted in multiple ways, so diaspora can be conceptualized as a form of cultural denigration, as well as a form of empowerment of the colonized. An example of it is the incident when Feroza is locked in the dark stairway.

The staircase symbolizes hybridity; it should only be used in case of *emergencies*. One speculates the causes (read:emergencies) that result in displacement and hybridity of the colonized i.e. slavery, migration, enlightenment or economic crisis. Feroza is advised to use that stairway by a female foreigner, who seemed friendly *but should not be trusted*. It implicitly points out the futility of the idea of the universal sisterhood, highlighting the fact that the white women can play a role in the oppression of the women of color. When she is trapped in the stairway, Manek is unaware of her predicament, symbolizing the necessity to speak out one's experience. The stairway is represented as a place of filth and darkness where Feroza is trying to find her way blindly.

"It was also much colder. Feroza felt disoriented, confused for a moment about where she was. The air was rank with the odor of stale cigarette smoke and food. She got a whiff of urine and of decaying refuse." (p.88)
Feroza, lost and trapped, was not sure whether it is safe for her to make her presence felt in the stairway or should she remain silent, mingling up with the darkness. Her reaction of terror and fear on being trapped signifies the trauma of displacement. Adhering to the faith and reciting usual prayers did not help her out. Migrants, facing the cultural alienation try to look at the brighter side of the colonizer i.e. economic prosperity. Recalling the well-lit shops did not help her out. Shifting again to her faith, she started saying her prayers. Analyzing the situation practically, she decided to get out of the stairway through whatever way she could. Her feet were "sure" by now.

"Driven by her need for action, she went down more flights of endless steps. Her feet were by now sure, her descent down the shallow steps quick. She knocked the door at each landing." (p. 91)

Sidhwa comments on the perception by the colonized of the colonizer as she describes American diaspora using claustrophobic imagery:

"When she opened her eyes, her world had accountably shrunk, as if nothing existed outside the stairwell. America assumed a ruthless, hollow, cylindrical shape, without beginning or end, without sunlight, an unfathomable concrete tube inhabited by her fear. She was sure something monstrous was crouched in the impervious shadows, that patrolled this alien domain- ferocious sewer rats, a brutish Doberman- breathing softly, waiting patiently." (p.90)

The imagery of rats and dogs with qualifying adjectives "ferocious" and "brutish" along with the description of America as a shape which is identical to the shape of penis, makes the representation in line with the other representations of diaspora by the women of color. The image of the colonizer was further reinforced by other such images which were created by her fears:

"The dark impersonal face of the man leering at her in the mirror when she looked up from brushing her teeth, the brutal faces of men who slyly muttered obscenities in the halls, the dangerous focused stare of the drug dealer who had loomed whitely out of the recessed door way on Forty-second Street." (p.91)

The episode ends when Feroza, out of fear of "swarthy men" of her imagination, starts hearing incomprehensible voices. She runs up, bangs at the door which is opened from the other side by a Japanese who tells her that the stairway is a place where she could be raped or murdered and no one would ever know. The episode is significant because it conceptualizes diaspora from the perspective of the women of color, whose experience is different from that of her male counterparts.

Dalton(1995) in her essay "The Devil and the Virgin: Writing Sexual Abuse in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl" notices that the African American writers used the imagery of ear, demon, devil and serpent to portray the colonizer; their experience being different from the colonized male. She further notices that in *the Incidents*, the white master Dr. Flint is represented as a demon violating Linda Brent by whispering in her ear. Such images depict sexual harassment and exploitation of the colonized women. Kristeva (cited in Dalton: 1995) is of the view that the ear becomes the site of a woman's sexual experience:

"That the female sexual organ has become transformed into an innocent shell which serves only to receive sound may ultimately contribute to eroticization of hearing and the voice, not to say of understanding. But by the same token, sexuality is reduced to mere implication. The female sexual experience is therefore anchored in the universality of sound." (p.43)

Sidhwa's portrayal of Feroza's hearing voices is significant as it hints at the experience of sexual exploitation of the women of color at the hands of the colonizer. Such representations rewrite the idiom of the colonizer because traditionally, the colonized are represented as lascivious, brutish and manipulating.

Furthermore, it is a colonized woman (Feroza) who is a strong adherent to her faith, as she whispers one hundred and one names of *Ahura Mazda* in contrast with the colonial representations where the trope of faith is attributed to the white male. The representations of diaspora here destabilize the boundaries between the colonizer and the colonized, from the angle of women of color. Another symbolic representation of cultural alienation is significant in Father Fibs' story. He believes that the immigrants like Manek, Jamil and Feroza will face even more cultural alienation as they leave their universities and enter into the practical life. "Flying" connotes assimilation in the foreign culture and "falling" signifies alienation. Sidhwa, through the mouthpiece of Father Fibs, point out that the process of assimilation will be painful but a time will come when the immigrants will be completely assimilated in the American culture. She is not critical about this assimilation, rather she represents it as an opportunity of empowerment. Economic empowerment results in adopting the American notions of sex and marriage, as Feroza speculates:

"Feroza's perception suddenly ignited when she remembered the smiling blond with the transparent green eyes in Harvard Square and the thought struck her like a jolt- what extraordinary sexual possibilities they would avail themselves of. Might not she, too, wish to prove herself? Even if she was only a girl? Explore possibilities that were beginning to palpitate and twinkle- as yet unrecognizable- on evanescent new horizons?"(p.116)

The episode ends when Father Fibs' hands collide with the fish tank and the fish, another symbol of immigrants, are unrecognizable on the carpet, indicating the complete assimilation of the colonized among the colonizer. The symbolism suggests the dual nature of diaspora, as it is both alienating, as well as empowering. Sidhwa's notions of diaspora and hybridity are significant as they highlight the process of assimilation and alienation in the host country. Bhabha (cited in Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffins: 1995) believes that the solution of colonization is the mimicry of the colonizer by the colonized. It results in incorporation of the marginalized with the center, where the colonized can also exercise their share of power.

6. Conclusion

Sidhwa can rightly be called a diasporic writer, as the cover of the novel describes that she "divides her time between the United States where she teaches and Lahore where she lives." Problematizing the concept of a fixed identity, Sidhwa represents her female protagonist as having multiple layers of identities. Tracing the circles of marginalization in Pakistan as well as in America, she dwells upon the strategies of the sexed subaltern for exercising agency. The critics of diasporic literature frown upon the notion of a fixed monolithic, universally shared experience of diaspora. When looked at in this way, Sidhwa's work stands out as it describes the various types and levels of marginalization. Furthermore, the boundaries between the oppressed and the oppressor are challenged. Located in various social and geographical positions, the women of color devise ways of exercising agency. While doing so, the standards of "normalcy" and "traditionally feminine" are re-conceptualized. It is this politics of gendering, its implications and repercussions that I have tried to explore in this paper.

Glossary

Ahura Mazda: The god of fire

Honor: It is synonymous to the concept of *izzat*. It implies that a woman should maintain her reputation and the reputation of her family according to the accepted code of ethics.

Hudood Ordinance: A controversial law against the women imposed in Pakistan in 1980s. The law was criticized because it made no distinction between adultery and rape.

Izzat, Asmat: These words, often synonymous refer to the concept of honor prevalent in the culture of North India and Pakistan. It implies that a woman should maintain her reputation and the reputation of her family according to the accepted code of ethics. If a woman's *izzat* is violated by a man, the revenge is obligatory for the woman's family. If a woman exercises sexual liberty or the right to choose her husband against the wishes of her family, the act is seen as dishonorable and often results in physical torture or murder of the woman by her family.

Zia: General Zia-ul-Haq was the military ruler of Pakistan in the decade of 1980s.

References

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (1995) *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*. London and New York: Routledge
- Brah, Avtar (1996/2003). "Diaspora, Border and Transnational Identities" in Lewis, Reina and Sara Mills, eds. *Feminist Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Clifford, James (1994) "Diasporas", *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 9, No. 3.
- Dalton, Anne B. (1995) "The devil and the virgin: writing sexual abuse in incidents in the life of a slave girl" In D. Lasghari (ed). *Violence, Silence and Anger-Women's Writing as Transgression*, 38-61. Virginia: University Press of Virginia
- Foucault, M. (1976). *History of Sexuality*. Victoria: Penguin
- George, Rosemary Marangoly (1996) "At a slight angle to reality: reading Indian diaspora literature." In *The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS)* 21(3). Retrieved on April 5th, 2011 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/467981>
- Henderson, Mae Gwendolyn (1994) "Speaking in tongues: dialogics, dialectics and the black woman writer's literary tradition." In P. Williams and L. Chrisman (ed). *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory- A Reader*, 257-267. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf
- Holland, W., W. Lachiocotte and D. Skinner. (1998) *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*. Cambridge, M.A: Harvard University Press
- JanMohamed, Abdul R. (1985) "The economy of the manichean allegory-the function of racial difference in colonial literature" *Critical Inquiry*. 12.1. Autumn. 59-87
- James, Fredric. (1988) "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." In *Studies in Culture: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Ann Gray and Jim McGuigan. London: Arnold, 1997, pp. 192-205.
- Lasghari, Deirdre. (1995) "Introduction: to speak the unspeakable: implications of gender, race, class and culture." In D. Lasghari (ed). *Violence, Silence and Anger-Women's Writing as Transgression*, 1-21. Virginia: University Press of Virginia
- McClintock, Anne. "The angel of progress: pitfalls of the term post-colonialism" (1994) In P. Williams and L. Chrisman (ed). *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory- A Reader*, 291-304. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf
- Mernissi, F. (1987) *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*. Rev. ed. Bloomington, Ind.
- Mitra, Madhuchhanda (1995) "Angry eyes and closed lips: forces of revolution in Nawal el Saadawi's god dies by the Nile. In D. Lasghari (ed). *Violence, Silence and Anger-Women's Writing as Transgression*, 147-157. Virginia: University Press of Virginia
- Minha, Trinh T. *Women, Native ,Other*. (1989) Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989
- Pessar, Patricia R. and Mahler, Sarah J. (2003) "Transnational migration: bringing gender in" In [Transnational Migration Review](http://www.jstor.org/stable/30037758). 37(3) Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30037758>
- Pennycook, A. (2007). *Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows*. London: Routledge
- Rehman, Tariq (2002) *Language, Ideology and Power*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- Said, E. (1978) *Orientalism*. New York: Random House