



Is Cocogen (An)Other Identity? A Critical Study of An American Brat

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Abstract

The present study seeks to introduce Cocogen, a portmanteau (or frankenword), derived from the initial letters of 'Coconut' and 'Generation'. It aims to view Sidhwa's *An American Brat* from the perspective of postcolonial criticism. The researcher has examined the characters and events of the selected fictional work to probe further for the study. It appears that the main characters of the novel follow the path of mimicry, knowingly or unknowingly, to represent the coconut generation. The study finds that characters are ambitious; they have high dreams about the American ways of life; they underrate their native culture; they do mimic the language and culture of the powerful. But, later on, they discover that their major shortcoming is attempting to be 'white'. It dawns upon the brown persons in the novel that they have come far away in the direction of mimicry and now they are unable to completely fit in the American culture. Though they are non-native brown people but still they want to live as per the demands of the culture. The study is significant because it explains why the inherent tendency of brown immigrants (South-Asians) tend to adopt the white culture and norms to become coconuts of their own volition. The study emphasizes that the interpretation and/or reception of cocogen is context-dependent, varying according to the situation and circumstances in which it is employed.

Keywords:

An American Brat, Bapsi Sidhwa, Cocogen, Coconut, Mimicry.



Introduction

Pakistani literature in English is now an emerging field in literary studies that needs the attention of researchers of literary studies and it has its own standpoint as far as the problems of Pakistanis are concerned. The researcher selected *An American Brat*, a postcolonial novel, for research. The theme of mimicry centres around the postcolonial dilemma faced by the people who belonged to the areas once colonized. The current study proposes to study the novel through the lens of mimicry theorized by Homi Bhabha. It explains how immigrants attempt to be “almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha, 1994). The study undertakes the protagonist’s attempt to mimic the host civilization and culture. Such characters cause us to consider the mental trauma of immigrant and their desire to be like the natives of the colonizer’s land. In the same way in *An American Brat*, Feroza is sent to America for advanced studies and self-development. This attitude of her parents shows that in the core of their hearts, they have considered the colonizers as ideal beings. In their attempt to mimic the colonizers, their identity is broken in such a manner that they become ambivalent and indecisive about their identity. The present study explores the causes and effects of mimicry in *An American Brat* and focuses on the protagonist of *An American Brat* who tries to shape her identity as an immigrant in the Western (American) society.

Background

Coconut generation is a term that appeared in *Understanding the Coconut Generation: Ministry to Americanized Indians* (2006) by Sam George. The author used Coconut as a metaphor for Asian Indians who, as the second generation of American Indians, struggle in American or Western society. Some other food items are also being used as metaphors to represent different races and generations such as Apple, Oreos and Bananas. Banana is used for East Asians, Oreos for blacks and Apples for native Americans. (Miller, 2014)

Members of American social media space used a slur of Coconut for Kamala Harris when she became Biden’s running mate in 2020. South Asian politicians like Bobby Jindal faced the same accusation in 2015 and he had to disown his Indianess using the hashtag #bobyjindalissowhite (Sampath, 2024). Similarly, Chinese media in 2014 used another fruit to signify a 3rd Generation Chinese-American, Gary Locke as a Banana – Yellow skin and white heart. Another story, years ago, was circulated when the democratic activists (political rivals) threw Oreos on Michael Steele (Miller, 2014).

Postcolonial criticism looks at social, racial, political, economic and religious interactions between the colonizers and the colonized in colonial times and between neocolonial powers and the colonized after decolonization. Bhabha theorises the concepts of ambivalence, hybridity and mimicry. Hybridity refers to mixing and mingling to produce something new. Bhabha is of the view that postcolonial cultures are complex and cosmopolitan. Bhabha is of the view that people especially immigrants mimic the host cultural norms and in doing so they lose their roots. He says, “if in some sense mimicry is colonial desire, then in its double vision of mimesis and menace, colonial discourse must continually be haunted by the most terrifying "sameness-difference" (Bhabha, 1994).

Postcolonial studies, not only, study the effects of colonization in the countries that won independence from colonial masters in the 20th century, but also, deconstruct the colonial construction of eastern people. In fact, the personal views of Sidhwa show that she does not believe in the stereotypical construction of South Asians done by colonialists. She believes in her Pakistani identity. She believes that she has to help the nation realize its lost dignity. Sidhwa argues:

‘I feel if there's one little thing I could do, it's to make people realize: we are not worthless because we inhabit a country which is seen by Western eyes as a primitive, fundamentalist country only . . . I mean, we are a rich mixture of all sorts of forces as well, and our lives are very much worth living’ (Sidhwa, 1990).

Her words point to a postcolonial issue—regaining lost identity and honour in the world as a nation. Her thoughts are in line with the themes of postcolonial literature. In fact, it reveals the destructive effects of partition on the lives of people. Tariq Rehman in his book *A History of Pakistani Literature in English* states about the art of Sidhwa's writings, "Bapsi Sidhwa has written one of the most powerful indictments of the riots during the partition. Before this novel, there was almost nothing in English except some works of Khwaja Ahmad Abbas and short stories of H.K Bukhari and Tabussum" (Rehman, 1991).

Postcolonial literature discusses issues of the colonized people, their problems and fears are presented through the postcolonial literature. When the colonizers liberate the land of the colonized, the colonized find themselves in a state of indecisiveness. They get confused about the originality of their own culture that had been unpurified due to the mixing of the culture of the colonizers. The discourse of postcolonial literature shows the authority of the colonizer over the colonized even after their liberation. Colonizers who even after leaving the colonized physically have their existence among the colonized through their ideology and their cultural norms and even through their language. When individuals from once colonised areas migrate to the colonial or imperial power, they mimic the host culture and society. In so doing they succumb to adopting the host culture and ideology while having the same ethnic and racial roots. Despite their brown appearance, they are white on the inside, like coconuts. The study envisions the expatriate writers and immigrant characters as the representatives of cocogen.

Research Methodology

A close reading of the constituent parts requires going beneath the surface so that bigger meanings can be unearthed. The present study is qualitative in nature and the selected text has been analyzed using postcolonialism as a general theoretical framework whereas Bhabha's notion of mimicry is used as a conceptual framework to investigate *An American Brat* critically. Moreover, the study aims to view the circumstances in which the immigrant characters shape their identities under multiple intersecting factors.

Analysis

The concept of mimicry theorized by Homi Bhabha is applied to critically analyze *An American Brat* by Bapsi Sidhwa. The novel embodies most of the features and aspects of mimicry. Mimicry begins with colonial discourses which underline the importance of attaining civilization through mimicry. These discourses encourage the colonized to mimic the colonizers' culture and language.

One of the aspects of mimicry is that the colonized underrate their native culture. Thus, Cyrus, Zareen and Manek don't have a high opinion about Pakistani culture. Zareen is anxious about her daughter being infected by the wrong prevailing ideas. She tells her husband that 'she is becoming more and more backwards every day. She won't even answer the phone anymore (p.2). Similarly, Manek refers to Pakistan as a third-world people.

In this novel, there is an environment where American culture symbolizes development and enlightenment. Jajja (2013) explains that Even after independence, Pakistan and its people like many other so-called developing cultures are still living in the shadows of American neo-colonialism, which has a direct impact upon people, their culture and their identities' (p. 84). This is why, Zareen believes in the usefulness of sending her daughter to the US for the sake of enlightening her mind. Her conviction that exposure to the US life would make her daughter liberal in outlook, is actually part of the concept of mimicry. Colonists' ways were symbols of civilization during colonial times. After decolonization, imperialist or neocolonial powers are symbols of quality education and their living ways are symbols of enlightenment. When Feroza is leaving for the USA, her family gathers to see her off. The way Sidhwa describes the familial environment shows how people regard life in the USA. Sidhwa writes 'Feroza's voluble aunts looked proud and exhilarated as if they had a share in the adventure she was embarked upon (p.38). Furthermore, she is given a warm farewell. She writes, 'At a

little after two o'clock, a stately cavalcade of nine cars, their chassis swinging low from the loads passengers and luggage, drove out of the gates of Ginwalla residence. (p.42).

Manek symbolizes the ambitiousness of the colonized after the decolonization. He is doing PhD in the USA. He is ready to change his identity and become Mike in NASA seeking for a new identity construction. In addition, Feroza also becomes ambitious after visiting the USA. Her family reminds her that she has to stay in the USA for three months. She insists that she must pursue her career. Zareen realizes the new standpoint her daughter has gained in the USA. Another feature of mimicry is that the immigrants adapt the language, culture and, somehow the religion of the colonizers or the imperialists.

The protagonist of the novel adapts to the peculiar accent of American English like a mimic. She notices that when she speaks in Pakistan accent and formal vocabulary, she is treated as a stranger. Therefore, she gradually develops the knack of speaking in an American accent under the guidance of Jo her Pygmalion there. Sidhwa informs us, that Jo 'made Feroza practice saying, 'Gimme a lemonade. Gimme a soda and cured her of saying 'May I have this –may I have that? Pretty soon Feroza was saying, 'Hey, you goin' t the laundry? Gitme a Coke' (p.158).

Manek, Feroza and Zareen try to adapt to Western culture in the USA. Lone argues that 'Bapsi Sidhwa shows Parsis extremely preoccupied with abiding Westernization. One of the reasons for this is the long-standing policy of the community of proximity towards the state, a close relationship between state and community based on mutual support (2012, p.8). He further explains that 'America is within the hearts of Parsis as a land of dreams of liberty and of freedom from age-long conventionalities' (2012, p.9). As already mentioned, Manek has immersed himself in the US culture. He changes his name from Manek to Mike shaping his new or another identity. It has already been discussed that Feroza starts drinking wine and smoking cigarettes. Thus, the way she adapts to the host culture, she gets closer to new or another identity. All these forms of independence were unthinkable in Pakistan. Sidhwa comments:

'She felt she was being initiated into some esoteric rites that governed the astonishingly independent and unsupervised lives of young people in America. Often, as she sat among them, Feroza thought she had taken a phenomenal leap in perceiving the world from a wider, bolder and happier angle (p.168).'

She learns to dance and lives alone with David and two other girls. Her mother also is impressed by the American lifestyle. In the USA, Sidhwa tells us that 'Zareen was as happy as a captive seal suddenly released into the ocean' (p. 300). Sidhwa further records that in the USA, 'Each day the next week, Feroza dropped her mother off at one or another of the gleaming shopping malls. To Zareen's dazzled sense, they were pieces of paradise descended straight from the sky, crammed with all that was the most desirable' (p. 299). In Pakistan, she wears saris but, in the US, she wears western dresses Sidhwa informs us that in the two long closets of Feroza 'the hanging spaces were jammed with Zareen's new blouses, pants and jackets' (p. 299). Zareen was very happy with her new shopping and dressing experiences in the USA. Sidhwa informs the reader that 'enriched, Zareen made her daily debut modelling her new clothes in the kitchen and was as delighted as a teenager by the approving glances and flattering comments of whoever happened to be breakfasting' (p. 299). In addition, Feroza and David stand for their respective cultures and countries as do Erica and Changez represent their respective cultures and countries in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Loving the colonizer means adapting your girlfriend's or boyfriend's culture.

Feroza adapts to the religion of the Unitarian Church Society. Feroza informs her mother, 'David and I are Unitarians' (p. 291). When her mother met her friends from the same church, she felt that they were reasonable people. Mathew (2014) argues that 'she is quite confident that the path she has chosen, which was to become a Unitarian and to have a civil marriage,

was correct. This way she can keep her religion and marry David. But the roots of her own ethnic ties were deeper than she thought' (p. 8). Unitarians have the freedom to maintain links with their native religion. They can combine morals and principles from a variety of religions. David and Feroza were going to be inter-faith couples so they needed the help of a religious organization which was tolerant of inter-faith marriage. So, they became Unitarians.

To understand the element of mimicry in the novel, there is a need to apply the mimicry model to four characters that stand as mimics in the novel. In other words, there are four mimic persons in the novel: Manek, Feroza, Zareen and Aban. These four characters represent the dictum of the colonized mimicking the colonizers. However, the degree of mimicry undertaken varies from character to character. The researcher has put Manek in the innermost circle of mimicry because he has acculturated himself with American culture. He believes that 'America is Paradise' (p.205). He has changed his name from Manek to Mike. He and Jo perform the role of colonial teachers, as Crusoe did in *Robinson Crusoe*. As Crusoe civilizes Man Friday, Manek and Jo try to civilize a person from the third world—Feroza. In the first outer circle, it is Feroza. She has adapted to the language, culture and religion of the US society. She wears English dresses, takes cigarettes, dances and drinks wine. In the next outer circle, it is Zareen who mimics liberals in Pakistan and when she goes to the US, she mimics American culture in dress, shopping and thoughts in pursuit of new identity and appropriateness in host society. In the last outer circle, there is Aban. She dreams of going to the US but is not happy with her life in the US. So, the element of mimicry is at its lowest level in Aban.

Failure in mimicry is one of the aspects of mimicry. Nixon (2000) observes that 'a *mimic man* can strive to become Anglicized but can never become English' (p. 204). Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* depicts the same idea of the built-in limitations. *The Mimic Men* is a confessional narrative of displacement and mimicry. In this novel, the protagonist, Ranjit Kripalsingh changes and becomes Ralph Singh through mimicry of the colonizers. The protagonist thinks about his failure in becoming a proper Englishman. Mimics are torn between their native identity and their adopted identity. When Manek returns to Pakistan, his family throngs Lahore Airport to receive him. Passengers come out of the glass doors. Manek is also spotted by one of the youngsters of the family. But, the family is shocked to see his face swaddled in white bandages. When he meets his family, he starts undoing his bandage. Sidhwa writes, 'Relieved from the bondage, Manek broke his silence, 'I've hurt my jaw...Speaking this wretched English all the time has worn my jaws. Don't anyone dare talk to me in English' (p. 203). Talking about Chengez of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Jajja (2013) writes, 'But, even his mimicry cannot grant him acceptance and equality in the American society. He is still regarded as "Other" (p. 40). This 'otherness' may be taken as an other-identity which is gained by the mimic character in pursuit of another or new identity. His Pakistani-ness cannot be camouflaged by his expensive suit, expensive car or even by the company of his American friends' (p. 85). Similarly, Feroza's mimicry cannot grant him acceptance in her relationship with David. His parents are reluctant to accept her and David is also reluctant to accept her when he meets her mother. David thinks that religious disparities do not matter but after meeting Feroza's mother and witnessing her strange and 'magical' practices, he is convinced that religious differences matter. Here, he is unable to accept the religion as an intersectional factor that constructs Feroza's identity.

The very thing that had attracted him to Feroza, her exoticism now frightened David . He felt inadequate, wondering if he could cope with some of the rituals and behavior that despite his tolerant and accepting liberality seemed bizarre. Stuff his mouth with sweets; break a coconut on his head! And were he by some gross mischance accepted to the Zoroastrian faith, which fortunately was not permissible, he'd have the singular honor of having his remains devoured by vultures and crows in a ghastly Tower of Silence' (p. 323).

Thus, Feroza's white mask is torn apart and she is left alone by her mother and David. Love is not possible between master and servant. Sidhwa perhaps is showing Feroza to the reader an intolerant individual in American society here. Feroza sends her family a letter informing them about her intentions to marry David Press. The family is alarmed at the situation. Elders of Parsi family of Feroza gather in Lahore to discuss a familial emergency in the US. Family elders look crumpled at this rebellion.

Mishra (2015) explains, 'In multicultural environments the minority communities face identity crisis. The consistent and stable identity constructs, seem to be collapsing due to fast social transformations, as a result, is seen the emergence of the concept of multiple identities' (p.29). Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* depicts mimicry and ends at a note of identity crisis and disillusionment. Nayar (2015) observes that in postcolonial era, writers explored the agonies of mimic men who fitted neither into western cultures nor their native ones (p.104). Is Feroza such a character? After losing David, Feroza's friends try to divert her attention from separation but her spirits were extinguished and she became listless. When Shashi tries to declaim some Urdu ghazals to the dejected figure, Sidhwa tells the reader, 'Feroza wept, yearning for the land of poets and ghazals she had left behind' (p. 326). She also thinks about her friends in the Convent of Sacred Heart in Lahore. But she realizes that she cannot go back to the land of pets and her friends. Sidhwa writes, 'From her visit to Lahore, Feroza knew she had changed and the life of her friends there had also changed, taken a different direction from hers' (p. 326). So, she is in a position where she fits neither into western culture nor into her Parsi culture. She is disillusioned by the Westernization or Americanization. Mishra (2015) explains, 'The novel ends with Feroza realizing that she does not need to amputate her own culture from herself in order to survive on an alien soil' (p. 29). It is, perhaps, owing to the color of her skin that she could not change. She has a brown skin color (ethnically) and white internally or intellectually.

Zareen is a hedonistic shopper. Her love for shopping makes her fall in love with the USA in first sight. This first-sight love undergoes changes. She also learns that everything is not perfect in American culture and that she made a mistake in sending her child to America. Manek is ambitious and regards America as a paradise. Mishra (2015) explains, 'Manek realizes that he needs to form a new identity for himself for survival in his new environment. He changes his name to Mike Junglewalla. His wife too addresses him by the same when they are with Americans' (p. 29). But, Manek also suffers from identity crisis. Mishra (2015) argues, 'Manek swings between two spaces: locational as well as cultural. He aspires for acceptance by land of his dreams and at the same time feels nostalgic for his homeland' (p. 29). Sidhwa informs the reader that he runs his hand emotionally over the sweater sent by his mother, 'it had been a long time since anyone had bothered to pamper him' (p. 68).

Answering to first research question that deals with the inevitability for Feroza to mimic the host culture it is stated that Feroza herself thinks that it is inevitable to mimic the culture in the USA to grow and thrive as a student and individual because if she sticks to her Parsi culture in the USA, people might keep her at arm's length. For instance, in Idaho, at Twin Falls' junior college, she discovers the difference between her being Asian and a Pakistani. *An American Brat* seems to conform, to a large extent, to the concept of mimicry given by postcolonial theorists such as Fanon and Bhabha. This statement is based on the evidence that most of the aspects of mimicry are found in the four characters of the novel: Zareen, Feroza, Manek and Aban. These all four characters mimic host culture ambitiously or reflexively to shape a new identity so that they could survive there. Hence, in pursuit of a new identity such immigrant characters mimic the host culture and the language but they can not change their skin color. Such an immigrant generation may be identified as a cocogen because they are brown by their skin color but white in their approach particularly while living in Western society.

Conclusion

The current study tried to understand *An American Brat* from the critical perspectives of mimicry and postcolonial criticism while focusing on the mimic as a cocogen. The researcher used Bhabha's view of mimicry and its effects on the mimics. The model was applied to the main characters of the novel *An American Brat*. The study views the main characters that travel to the US (Feroza, Zareen, Manek and Aban) as representatives of the cocogen because behavioral and communication mimicry is evident in their character. It seems inevitable for Feroza and Manek to mimic Western culture because, without mimicry, identities and behavior might create a gap between them and Americans. Mimicry plays a constructive role in making Feroza a liberal girl according to the wishes of her mother. But, there are destructive aspects of mimicry highlighted by the author. Zareen thinks that Feroza has become too liberal to listen to her or that she has become an American brat. Keeping in view the title of the novel, it may be said that it is the destructive role of mimicry which is the central theme of the novel. Most of the features of mimicry such as discourses of 'civilization' by colonists or imperialist, ambitiousness of the colonized or weaker ones, conviction of the immigrants (with colonized background) in mimicry, mimic men being derided by their own native group, adapting language, culture and religion of the colonizers, failure in mimicry, the ensuing disillusionment and identity crisis are found in the four characters of the novel: Zareen, Feroza, Manek and Aban. Analyzing the novel in this context revealed the usefulness of the novel for Pakistanis because it shows the dilemma of elite Pakistani people who travel to the West and try to adapt to Western ways of life and then discover their built-in limitations. In this way, they can be changed mentally and ideologically, but not ethnically and, sometimes, are called coconuts. Hence, immigrant characters like Feroza and the expatriate writers form a new identity – cocogen to fit in West society. Cocogen may be taken as another or an *other* identity that has a direct link with color of skin. The identity of an immigrant in Western society is shaped by multiple intersecting factors. An identity or identifying symbol and its representation and interpretation vary depending on the context in which it is used. Some of the immigrant artists are now accepting the coconut identity with taking it offensive. In one of her live performances, Reem Edan, a Muslim-American Stand-up comedian called her brother a coconut. Hence, there appears a generation among the immigrants that could be identified as cocogen.

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