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**DIASPORA, MULTICULTURALISM AND THE WORLD OF GLAMOUR IN
KAVITA DASWANI'S SALAAM PARIS**

Research paper in ENGLISH

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Abstract:

Kavita Daswani is one of the contemporary Diaspora writers who is mobile in international space. Her association with the major cosmopolitan cities around the globe due to her profession of a fashion correspondent for the leading magazines and publications brings forth the world of fashions and glamour in her narratives. Generally, her writings are considered and categorized as chic-lit but when one reads them seriously, understands that Daswani proliferates the struggle of younger generation—the teenage Indian females or newlywed girls who struggle in the international space to create their comfort zone and identity. The present paper attempts to explore a diasporic narrative, Salaam Paris by Daswani in the light of the changing locations and identities.

The paper touches upon the geographical cultural, national, lingual, ethnic, social, religious locations. Anaya Shah, a young, beautiful Muslim girl, a resident of Mahim from one of the suburbs of Mumbai, develops a fetish for fashions and modeling which she gradually obtains through her beauty, risk, flight and plight. In her itineraries as a model she explores variant national and international locations and also her 'self'. Being born in an orthodox Muslim family, she faces an array of restrictions, accusations and labels as she enters the world of fashions and glamour. Daswani epitomizes the

psychological trauma that Tanaya experiences due to the shift in geographical locations which provide her fame and identity but at the same time her ethnicity and religion pinch her. Also, it touches upon the issues of Gender Studies, Migration Studies, Diaspora and Culture Studies.

Key Words: *locations, Diaspora, culture, identity.*

Kavita Daswani is a contemporary female writer of Diaspora community who was born in Hong Kong, China. She represents the second generation migrants as she is born to Indian parents, basically from Mumbai, the cosmopolitan capital city of Maharashtra. She too is a mobile subject transgressing borders of many nations. Kavita lived in Hong Kong, China for thirty years. She began her career as a fashion journalist at the age of seventeen. After her marriage she moved to the United States of America and settled there. Currently, she is a fashion correspondent for CNN International, CNBC Asia, and Women's Wear Daily. She has written for the Los Angeles Times and the International Herald Tribune among many other publications and has been the fashion editor of the South China Morning Post in Hong Kong. Her profile showcases her inheritance of cultural hybridity, multiculturalism, migration, transnationalism and multilingualism as her family is originally from India, Mumbai, and her growth in Hong Kong and settlement in America. She now lives in Los Angeles with her husband and two sons. Her stories have appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, *International Herald Tribune*, *Vogue India*, and *Entrepreneur* magazine, among many other publications.

Kavita Daswani's diasporic itineraries are evident in her literary productions as well. Her first novel, *For Matrimonial Purposes*, saw the light in 2003 which explicates the worry of a family for the unmarried daughter, Anju, the focal character in the novel. Despite the best efforts of relatives, fortune-tellers, and matchmakers to arrange a marriage, she cannot seem to find a husband. This forces her into the lot of spinsters—a cultural marginalization. She is eager to escape the community that views her as a failure, and to seek her prospects in America. After major success as a print journalist and fashion correspondent on national television, Kavita Daswani makes her sparkling debut as a novelist with this hilarious and heartwarming tale of a young woman's travels between the strict customs of India and the wild freedoms of America, proving that while the search for love takes many forms, the heartbreak *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills* (2004) chronicles the story of village girl who moves in the international space, California to perform her role of a dutiful wife and a traditional daughter-in-law busy with

her culinary chores. As she doesn't immediately get pregnant, she finds a job which provides her a space of her own- a secret life full of freedom. In this novel, Daswani questions the reliability of marriage, man-woman relationship and familial ties as well. Daswani released her first Young Adult book, *A Girl Named Indie*. Her books have been published in 17 languages. This indicates the popularity and demand for her writings. The target reader of Kavita Daswani is the young generation. As a result her literary texts are labeled as 'chick lit'. Her novels epitomize the issues of marriage, especially arranged marriage in India and its overabundance of conditions of suitability or unsuitability. Daswani interrogates the institution of marriage and the cultural and ethnic ties of India. Her female protagonists are set in the wild liberty of America contrasting it with the socio-cultural traits of India.

Daswani's narratives reflect the age old search for the perfect man. On the other hand, her women always land seductively flashy careers. This placement of the females in host nation and turning to homeland for a life partner who does not suit exactly their expectations is the thematic thread of Daswani's fiction. The book jackets with a trendy hot pink backgrounds or a modern and fashionable figure of a woman chatting on her cell phone indicate the postmodernism, cultural hybridity, feminism, youth and love which attract more young readers towards them. Further, she insists upon her female-driven fiction delve deeper than Hollywood adventures and Parisian tailoring as they are not merely books of fashion shows or stories of movies. Moreover, her fiction explicates the cross-culturalism and a documentation of intellectual interactions.

Daswani's latest published novel, *Salaam Paris* (2006), puts the substance in what most might call a beach read by touching on issues of generational and cultural conflict. Surely, this novel concentrates on the focal character, Tayana, a beautiful young Indian woman who romantically desires for Paris after fanatical viewings of *Sabrina*. Conversely, her traditional beliefs and her arranged marriage get challenged when she becomes the world's first Muslim supermodel. Here, Daswani epitomizes the problems of a female who is a member of multiple marginalizations due to her diasporic identity, religion, familial and marital status and gender.

Daswani represents not only multiple migrations but multiple genres such as fashions, as she is strongly connected with the world of fashions which is so arbitrary and vibrant, journalism

which again invites meticulousness, alertness and novelties, travelling and literature. As a result, her narratives exhibit the freshness and novelties of the intricacies of human life. Her books represent the changes taking place in the Diaspora Indian communities, especially regarding institutions such as marriage, the wife's role in families, and increasing opportunities for women. Daswani's combination of humor and cultural tension make her books an interesting reading. The unconventional American 'desi' heroine defies Indian tradition to find her own happy ending. The geographical shift triggers the exploration in multiple femininities, cultural and societal issues as well as the gender roles.

The novel *Salaam Paris* is based on a Muslim girl named Tanaya Shah, a dynamic Indian immigrant girl who is mesmerized by western culture. She is raised by her mother and grandfather. Tanaya's mother is disowned by her father when she was a young child. But her grandfather treated her like his own daughter. As her mother is abandoned, her grandfather is taking her utmost care. She is born and raised in Mahim, a suburb in Mumbai, but she wants to explore the world outside it. In addition to this, she was born in the family where women have best facial features. Except her mother, all the members in the family were extremely beautiful. Tanaya's mother was abandoned by her father because she had an ugly appearance. Unfortunately, her mother was well aware of this fact, and thus hated her. Her mother had become sarcastic and cruel towards her over the years. That's why there is more attachment between Tanaya and her grandfather.

Like every young girl, she has a fantasy about western culture and lifestyle. She is amazed by the glossy magazines that portrayed women in a stylish way. She reads all Western magazines, especially, *Teen Cosmo* with her best friend, Nilu. There happens to be a private conversation between them about going to Paris. She wants to become a supermodel in Paris even though modeling is not her passion. She wants freedom and a new change in her life. Meanwhile, her grandfather finds a proposal for her from Paris, whose name is Tariq Khan. She grabs this opportunity to go to Paris, where she becomes a part of modeling industry. She defies the tradition, and stays in Paris against her family's wishes. Initially, she works as a waitress and eventually becomes the first Muslim supermodel to hit the fashion world.

The fashion world had always been her attraction – the world she makes optimum use of in all the novels. The cosmopolitan footing enables her to broaden and differentiate the world

view – the Eastern and the Western world, worlds profoundly different in terms of attitude and perspective. All her four books record the changes that take place in the diasporic Indian communities, especially about institutions such as marriage, the wife's role in families, and increasing opportunities for women outside the confinement of four walls. Daswani has only heroines taking the centre seat in her novels. Daswani's female protagonists, Anju in *For Matrimonial Purposes*, Tanaya Shah in *Salaam Paris*, Priya in *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills*, and Indira in *The Girl Named Indie* need special commendation for their trendsetting roles.

The protagonist Tanaya Shah of *Salaam Paris* would not fit herself into the stereotyped role attributed to women throughout generations for whom her paternal grandfather is a spokesperson. He dictates: "settle your mind on the only role you have in this world: pretty and quiet wife and a devoted mother. Remember that, and you will always be happy"(5). Tanaya born into an orthodox Muslim family is entranced by the fashion world of Paris, the world that she fell in love with while watching Audrey Hepburn in *Sabrina*. Unlike Sabrina who was driven by passionate love, Tanaya's resolve evolves out of a desperate attempt to carve an independent life and identity for herself "in the world, and of the world, and not just to stand aside and watch"(10). When Tariq's proposal comes her way, she seizes the opportunity to fly to her land of dreams. Though her grandfather initially denies her wish later concedes by extracting a promise that she would marry Tariq. The outright daring decision taken by Tanaya to stay back in Paris, thorough shocks the orthodox grandfather whose conventional upbringing forces him to disown her.

Landing in Paris, Tanaya, unlike Daswani's other protagonists, seems to enjoy the foreign air without resentment. She turns down Tariq with inept silence. Her decision is encouraged by Shazia, the hostess and distant cousin, who finds her a job as a waitress before she accidentally lands up as a supermodel. Initially, in Paris she feels both attracted and repelled by the fashion world. At the outset, she fears the alienated life in Paris: "I had no home, no job, no money. In Mahim nana had given me an allowance every week ... There at least I belonged to someone. Here, now on this cool Paris night ... all I wanted to do was to go back home" (40). She feels "untethered, unwanted" in Zoe's house with whom she shares the apartment. Daswani expatriates Tanaya's outburst on Shazia, revealing her intention to leave for India immediately:

'I'm making a horrible mistake,' I said then, through tears. 'I should never had let you talk me into this. It seemed like a joke, but it's not.' Suddenly I was angry with her. 'They trusted me and I abused it. You may feel it's OK to live without family. I do not. They are all I have. I'm changing my mind. I'm going home today as I planned.' (Daswani: 2007: 36)

Earlier it was Tanaya who confesses to Shazia that “[I] really don’t want to go back there [home]” (Daswani: 2007: 33). When Dimitri offers her an opening in modelling career she shuns the opportunity outright by explaining that she would be shortly returning to India. As if predestined the beautiful, tall, radiant and stunning Tanaya bangs the stage. Nevertheless she feels that “none of this meant anything to me, and I found it very hard to get excited about something I had no connection with” (Daswani: 2007: 81).

In one of her shows when handed down a costume imported from India she longingly sniffs for the scent of her country:

I lifted it up to my face, the wooden beads and sparkly sequins pressing into my skin, just to see I could detect a scent of my country, perhaps a micro-drop of sweat from one of the workers who had toiled on it or a whiff of dust from the factory in which it was made. (Daswani: 2007: 102)

As she moves forward in her career, memories drag her back towards her grandfather “who loved her more than anything else in the world” (Daswani: 2007: 94). All the while she never stops speculating on her grandfather’s curses and the gossips going around in Ram Mahal. Mahim continues to live in her consciousness and the instinctive Indian values never lead her astray. When friends insist to try alcohol, she strictly detains from it. At the party, Karla forces Tanaya to taste it. She muses thus:

There were plenty of Muslims who drank alcohol, I reasoned with myself. And after everything I'd done, was I even considered a Muslim anymore? Did Allah even care about me now? My hand

reached across the table; I picked up the glass by its skinny stem and held it up to the light. Then I turned towards Kai, handed him the glass, and told him to enjoy it. (Daswani: 2007: 151)

Even during interview sessions she asserts her Indian-Muslim identity who “ate no pork and consumed alcohol” and strictly performed the religious duties. When attending the shoots on the European beaches, she fondly remembers her childhood days collecting sea shells on Juhu beach with her Nana. Whenever Stravos attends on her with affectionate care she recollects the memories of Gopibhai who used to fuss over her as if she were a wounded bird.

Paris certainly has made her the woman of her dreams – an independent woman with a flamboyant career. The ardently opted world continues to instill life in her after all it had given her career, fame, money and identity. After the short lived loneliness in Zoe’s place she was “beginning to feel happy and at home” (61) in Paris and to crown it she utters: “... nothing more than me being in the right place at the right time (71). The next day of her first performance on stage she says, it had been a “moment of pure frivolity and spontaneity, two things I had never experienced before” (60). She does not have the problem of acceptance in the host societies, yet feels displaced and excluded. During her stay in America she says: “I didn’t belong here, and I would never be able to feign the coolness of these people” (108). On her return to Paris from New York she acknowledges that “Paris would always feel like home to me” (149), a “home away from home”. France becomes her established home and this realization dawns upon her while her closest friend Nilu enquires as to whether it had been worth leaving her family, to which promptly she replies “yes”. However, as the narrative proceeds to explore Tanaya’s successful modelling career in Paris and in America, it intensely oscillates between past memories of her grandfather’s home in Mahim and her present sojourn in Paris.

The past is further distanced by her grandfather’s refusal to accept her into the family. He had been the only person in her past life. Tanaya’s mother was a nebulous woman, a mere shadow, had only been indifferent and insensitive towards her own daughter. She had never seen her father or inherited anything except for his only letter. The past would have been an unpleasant experience if not for her grandfather. Tanaya has had the benefit of a protected

childhood which she yearns for back in Paris: “I felt like I could have been back at home in India, embedded in the security and safety with which I had grown up” (164).

During the first visit to Mahim, after leaving to Paris, she seldom thinks about the people who were “greatly responsible” in career-building. The fashion world turns quite surreal now:

Even when I was famous, I never felt it. And now, being a lifetime away from all that, it didn't even feel real anymore. I barely gave a thought to what had happened with Kai and his career, and Felicia and her neurosis, and Stravos and his wife he pretended he wasn't married to. They all seemed like characters I had read about in a book long ago, part of a life I had never really sought out, that I was now happy to leave behind. (Daswani: 2007: 195-96)

Tanaya's wish to push these people into the oblivion of her mind could be juxtaposed with the haunting memories of her grandfather. Her desperate attempt to reach her ailing grandfather before anything happened to him is clearly an act of expiation. Hopes for reunion are shattered as he neither curses nor blesses her:

He wasn't angry anymore, but that look on his face was still there, the one shadowed with disappointment and despair. He looked at me like I was the child who burned down the family house by mistake, unable to be blamed but a source of endless regret ... My grandfather might have still been alive. But I knew that I had already lost him. (Daswani: 2007: 197-198)

The reason for yearning to be back home leaves her totally disappointed. By losing her grandfather, she feels disconnected from the ancestral home and land. Unwelcomed by her mother, she is forced to leave India this time. However, her family will continue to live in her memories— an infinitely recyclable past. Her decision to marry Tariq apparently sums up the innate desire to be accepted once again into the familial net. Tanaya's nostalgia precisely reveals that she is homesick and sick of home at the same time.

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