



Shades of Diasporic Experiences in Indian Chick Lit: A Study of Kavita Daswani's Selected Novels

Harpreet Kaur

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Panjab University, Chandigarh

Abstract

Diasporic literature deals with the themes such as alienation, exile, loneliness, cultural conflicts and attempts to absorb into the foreign culture. A study of the diasporic writings exposes that the common characteristics in the writings of the old diaspora and the new diaspora include nostalgia, homesickness, and the pains owing to being far from the homeland. There are a large number of writers in Indian English literature who talk about various diasporic experiences in their writings. The field of Indian Chick Literature also includes the diasporic experiences of Indian heroines. Indian Chick Literature illustrates the struggle of the female protagonists for their career as well as to search Mr. Right. But it depicts all these issues with a lighthearted and often comical tone. This paper tries to analyze various diasporic experiences by discussing the novels *Salaam Paris* and *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills* by Kavita Daswani who is one of the contemporary diasporic writers. Daswani, a California-based writer, discovers interesting shades of diaspora in Indian Chick Lit. Her novels embody the changes taking place in the Diaspora Indian communities, particularly concerning the institutions like marriage, role of wife in the families, and growing opportunities for women.

Key Words: Diaspora# Indian Chick Literature# Loneliness# Nostalgia# Marriage

Diasporic literature has two associations: first, its association with the homeland that gives birth to nostalgia, and second, a counterfeit association with the foreign land that becomes a basis for such as alienation, exile, loneliness, cultural conflicts and attempts at assimilation with the alien culture.

Diasporic writing occupies a significant place in the field of literature and has been discussed by a number of writers in their writings. The diasporic writers in India and other countries have contributed by writing the experiences of

alienation, isolation and unsettlement. Diasporic writers are those who have settled in other or foreign countries rather than their home or native countries. The reason to undertake this journey is a craving for an exploration, abandoning the known spaces and join the alien regions, and a desire to find ways to limitless blue skies. Such writers often come across a significant number of buzz words like diaspora, immigration, nationality ethnicity, marginality and hybridity. There is a large number of such writers who elucidated the theme of diaspora in their writings. We have an array of Indian women writers like Bharathi Mukerjee, Chitra Banerjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Manju Kapoor, etc. In the twenty first century, it has become a common theme in new genre of popular fiction, Chick Lit. This tradition has been followed by number of Indian Chick Lit writers.

The term “Chick Lit” first appeared in the English speaking communities through the students of Princeton University who used it as a dismissive tag for Elaine Showalter’s “Female Literary Tradition” Course. Afterwards, American novelist and co-editor Criz Maza and Jaffery Deshell made use of this term in their groundbreaking anthology *Chick Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (1995). Then James Wolcott mockingly used this term in his article *Hear Me Purr: Maureen Dowd and Rise of Postfeminist Chick Lit* (1996) to mock at the girlish style of writing employed by female journalists in the columns of newspapers. The origin of the term Chik Lit can be traced back to Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jone’s Diary* (1996) and Candance Bushness’s *Sex and the City* (1997). The genre is best exemplified by these texts. In the form of a new genre of popular fiction, Chick Lit chooses its themes based on the concepts and problems in the lives of women such as friendship, fashion, beauty, love, marriage, roommates, consumerism, weight control, etc. It deals with all these subjects quite lightheartedly as well as humorously. Besides, the frequent images of pair of heels, a protagonist with a shopping bag, women’s red mouth with pearl necklace on the cover pages of Chick Lit novels clearly suggest what these books deal with.

After successfully establishing itself in Britain and America, Chick Lit appeared in India with Swati Kaushal’s *Piece of Cake* (2004). It has been developed and categorized into numerous sub genres including Young Adult Chick Lit for school girls, Mommy Lit for Moms, Jewish Chick Lit for Jewish, Assistant Lit for downtrodden career women struggling daily with unreasonable demands of their bosses, Lad Lit for young men and Indian Chick Lit for Indians. Indian Chick Lit is a subgenre produced for and aimed at young, single, working women of twenties and thirties. Indian Chick Lit significantly talks about the protagonist’s cultural struggle at foreign lands like America and England. There are numerous examples of Indian chick lit novels which delineate the theme of diaspora. Anuja Chauhan, Rupa Gulab, Advaita Kala, Rajashree and Kavita Daswani are some writers who are continuously writing on this particular theme. This paper tries to analyze various diasporic experiences by discussing the novels *Salaam Paris* and *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills* by Kavita Daswani who is one of the contemporary diasporic writers.

Kavita Daswani is comparatively a new writer amongst the women writers of the Indian diaspora settled in the USA. Belonging to the diaspora community, her early life was spent in Hong Kong and thereafter she went to Los Angeles. In the beginning of her career she joined South China Morning Post as a Journalist and established an association with Los Angeles Times as well as International Herald Tribune. She works as a fashion correspondent for CNN International, CNBC Asia, and Women’s Daily Wear. Her family originally belongs to Mumbai but she grew up in

Hong Kong. She is currently settled in Los Angeles with her husband and two sons. Her female protagonists are young and ambitious, married or yet to be married. Daswani has heroines taking the centre seat in her novels. She has authored the best-selling books *For Matrimonial Purposes* (2003), *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills aka Everything Happens for a Reason* (2005), *Salaam Paris* (2006), *Indie Girl* (2007), *Lovetorn* (2012) and *Bombay Girl* (2013). Daswani's popular novels have been described as Chick Lit. Her works depict the changes in the diasporic Indian communities, particularly concerning the institutions like marriage, the roles of wives in families and growing opportunities for women. This paper tries to delineate the diasporic experiences experienced by the protagonists Tanaya and Priya in the selected novels *Salaam Paris* and *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills* respectively.

In *Salaam Paris* (2007) Kavita Daswani unravels the story of a Muslim girl, Tanya Shaha who is a resident of Mahim, Bombay. Being born in a Muslim family she is taught by her family members that a girl must accept the secondary roles in the man-dominated society. As the story develops, we come to know that Tanaya's mother has been abandoned by her father when she was a child. Tanaya received utmost respect from her grandfather who nurtured her like his own daughter. Despite the prodigious care and affection received from her grandfather, Tanya continues to harbor the feelings of being neglected. Tanya has a long desire to go to Paris. She wants to visit Paris to experience her Sabrina moment. When she gets a proposal of marriage from a boy, Tariq Khan who is living in Paris, she accepts it at once. She seizes the chance to go to Paris. She is fascinated by the world of modeling and glamour. Her fetish for the same is evident when she spends her pocket money on secretly buying the magazines and reading them. She prefers to work and stay with single girls who want to make their career in Paris. She is fascinated by western culture and becomes a supermodel. She is disowned by her family. In the end, Tanaya finally gets married to Tariq Khan, and realizes that she was pursuing rather a mere image of herself.

In her another novel, *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills* (2004) she depicts the story of an ordinary village girl who transcends the rural boundaries and enters California to become an obedient wife and a traditional daughter-in-law who is always busy in household chores. Soon she grabs a job which helps her to lead a secret life with complete freedom. She finally gets a job as receptionist at a glamorous Hollywood magazine. She works in the world of glamour interviewing an array of renowned Hollywood stars and celebrities. In office she accepts the lifestyle of the host country and on the way back home she changes her dress at the gym and enters her home as a traditional Indian woman. She experiences a meteoric rise in her career. But her secret comes to known to her family. She realizes that her situation is untenable as her husband does not support her. She tricks him into the marriage counseling and her reaction to that experience compels her to leave the marriage and returns to India as an unhappy woman. Thus, the novels details about the immigrant experience.

William Safran in his article, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return" writes about the collective experiences of the people living on alien lands. According to him, there are six characteristics of such experiences: 1) They dispersed from a specific original 'center' to two or more 'peripheral,' or foreign, regions; (migration). 2) They share a joint memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland (nostalgia).3) They believe that the host society can never accept them completely and therefore they feel partially alienated and insulated from it;

(Alienation).4) They believe that their ideal home is not this foreign land but the land of their origin, i.e. their homeland. 5) They share the belief that it is their collective duty to maintain and restore their motherland and render it safety and prosperity; and 6) They are incessantly associated with their motherland in one way or another (83-84). This paper elucidates the shades of diasporic experiences by highlighting the issues of nostalgia, alienation, immigration from one country to another and cultural conflict as described by William Safran.

One of the central features of diasporic writing is a mapping out a journey. This is a journey from the immigrant's country to country, home to another home and one culture to the alien culture and again from the periphery of the alien culture to a different centre representing multi-culture, that is, a consciousness of at least two cultures or more. Indian protagonists of diaspora writers have a first-hand experience of being dislocated from their comfort zone-the homeland and home culture. The protagonists are distanced from the homeland, sometimes forced by choice or need to struggle to create a space of their own in an alien culture. In Indian chick lit novels marriage is the utmost reason. Marriage enables protagonists to move to and settle in foreign country after an arranged marriage. The protagonists find the freedom and independence to forge an identity of their own. In the novel *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills*, Kavita Daswani enunciates the stranded condition of Priya, newlywed bride who moves to the US with her husband and in-laws. After an arranged marriage, Priya moves from home land India to Beverly Hills with her husband Sanjay. For Priya, her accomplishment at work gives her a feeling of satisfaction which she cannot share with her husband or in-laws. Priya is a fashion correspondent, earning more than her husband.

As Dr. Balachandran quotes in his work, "Critical essays on Diasporic Writings", "The Indian immigrants most of whom migrated from India to the other foreign countries focus on the phenomenon of migration, the status of new immigrants and the feeling of alienation often experienced by expatriates" (1). The unavoidable situation that every immigrant faces is their alienation. This sense of alienation is portrayed in the lives of Daswani's protagonists Tanaya and Priya. And in the case of Tanaya, This is followed by a phase of loss and rejection in a hostile and unfamiliar society. She is left alone suddenly in an alien country to fend for herself. She fears the alienated life in Paris. Lonely and isolated in the foreign land, she desires to return to her homeland. Her longing for the homeland is evident in the following narration, "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" (269/40). She feels a sense of being "untethered, unwanted" at the residence of Zoe with whom she shares the apartment. Daswani depicts Tanya's explosion on Shazia as her frustration for not being able to leave for India immediately: "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." (36)

When a migrant departs from his homeland he also carries with him the feelings of homelessness. He is not only leaving his homeland but also cutting himself from his roots. Therefore, he is often found missing his native land. In *Worldliness-without –World, Homeliness-as-Home: Towards a Definition of the Specular Border Intellectual*, Jan Mohamed writes, "The notion of exile always emphasizes absence of 'home' of the cultural matrix that formed the individual subject; The nostalgia associated with the exile often makes the individual indifferent to the values and

characteristics of the host culture” (101). The feeling of homesickness has been presented by Daswani through the character of Tanaya and Priya. In both novels, there is a sense of nostalgia for the homeland and a feeling of alienation in the host country. There is a sense of longing to be at home, both - at home in the host country and back in India where one's family and roots are. Priya's parents have their house in Delhi's Defence Colony, where she along with her three elder sisters were sheltered and given a proper 'unspoiled' upbringing, while Tanaya was born in her maternal grandfather's house in the Mumbai suburb of Mahim. The sense of nostalgia is reflected in the way She feels at home in an Indian store in America, where customer service is not as sophisticated as in the other American stores. Priya longs for going India, her homeland, because “everything hurts, and [she] just want[s] to be with [her] parents” (249). Her longing for joining her family in India construes that India offers her a feeling of security. For Tanaya, home is where her nana and mother were; in Mumbai. She never stops craving to go back home. Tanaya is cast out from her family for her allegedly unethical behaviour which was against the cultural norms. “I thought of the nana who no longer loved me and the mother who perhaps never had and how truly, truly sad I was. I could feel the sadness in my blood, the slight ache that had hovered around my heart for the better part of the past year, covered by layers upon layers of little luxuries and pleasant distractions”(158). Tanaya remembers the moments she spent with her family members. “Not a day passed when I didn't think of Nana and my mother or when I wouldn't yearn for a platter of bhel puri from a Mahim street vendor ...” (61). The shooting at European beaches takes her back in her childhood when she used to gather sea shells on Juhu beach in the company of her Nana. The affectionate care offered by Stravos triggers the memories of Gopi bhai who was always worried for her and treated her as a vulnerable bird. Her yearnings for returning to her home make her enormously disappointed. The departure of grandfather disconnects her from her ancestral home as well as her homeland. Besides, the coldness and indifference of her mother further pushes her to leave India. Although she physically departs from her family, yet the mental images of her family never depart her. Thus, she rarely disconnects from her past which continues to occupy a considerable space in her thoughts. Her move to marry Tariq can be summed up as her innate desire to get herself into the familial net. Her nostalgia clearly indicates that she is feeling sick for her home. The depiction of the characters' longing for going back to home intends to suggest that they want to fix their culturally ripped souls by joining their homes.

Salman Rushdie, an Indian by origin, also talks about this partial identity of the migrants. In his book “Imaginary Homelands” he states, “Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, we fall between two stools.” (15) This experience of being 'in-between' two cultures is what the diaspora comes across in the foreign land. Daswani presents the in between situation of the protagonists in her novels. The protagonists attempt to adapt and assimilate to the host culture but not at the cost of their cultural values. However, there is an attempt, to break free from the rigid stereotypical cultural practices and beliefs, which, in turn empower them to forge an identity for themselves. This new identity is not a mimicry of the host culture, but one that gives them independence to assert their individuality without losing their touch with the home and its cultural values. They try to adapt to its lifestyle and culture but they intend to retain their native culture, tradition, custom and religion. Daswani's protagonist Priya adopts the culture of the host country and on the way back home she changes her dress at the gym

and enters her home as a traditional Indian woman. In the case of Tanaya, when friends insist to try alcohol, she strictly detains from it. At the party, Karla forces Tanaya to taste it. She muses, “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” (151).

Priya finds herself in an increasingly unhappy position due to her husband’s attitude who takes her for granted and ignores her desires and feelings. Priya tries to make things work and she makes every possible attempt to save her marriage, “because the only thing worse than being a single woman in India is being a divorced one” (196). There is lot of pressure put by the society on the women to remain married even in an unhappy relationship. Priya is aware of the Indian cultural norms and is hardly influenced by the American culture, as she points out, “It was one thing to live in America, but it was another to live like an American – to run and hide and fight and leave. In America, there is no shame in divorce. In India, there is no shame in living in marital misery. Somehow, I was going to find my place” (197). Priya’s identity formation as elaborated in length in this paper is a true testament to Stuart Hall’s theory. She is identifiable first as a married woman because she dresses like one with sindhoor and a mangalsutra and then goes through a complete physical and mental makeover in the United States, because her identity needs to be refurbished in the eyes of the Americans. She believes that to be successful, she needs to be accepted. She wants that she should be accepted and starts wearing jeans and tops by rejecting traditional dresses. when Priya arrives in Beverly Hills, she wears traditional Indian clothes such as a “daffodil yellow sari” (18) and a “light-blue-with-black-trim salwar kameez”(48). At work, Priya feels ugly and different when her work colleagues tell her that she looks “like a gypsy on speed” (81). Shanisse, Priya’s friend at work, takes Priya for a Western make-over and she gets new clothes, make-up, and a hair-cut. Afterwards, Priya feels “as attractive as Malini, or even Brooke Shields” (83). Thus, Priya’s identity has been developed under a new system of production and further reproduction because each time there is a new result, and that’s how she turns out to be a strong, empowered woman at the end of the novel. Transformation and difference really does the trick, as pointed out by Kavita Daswani.

Thus, belonging to diaspora communities Daswani has touched the issues of diaspora. Her novels have a diasporic theme of sense of displacement, self-identity, migration, alienation, quest for home, rootlessness etc.

Works cited:

- George, Rosemary Marangoly. *Politics of Home: Postcolonial relocations and twentieth-century fiction*. CUP: Cambridge, 1996.
- Balachandran K. *Indian Immigrants and their philosophy of composition*. New Delhi: Arise publishers, 2008. Print.
- JanMohamed, Abdul R. “Worldliness-without –World, Homeliness-as-Home: Towards a Definition of the Specular Border Intellectual”, *Edward Said: A Critical Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.
- Safran, William. ‘Diasporas in modern societies: myths of homeland and return’, *Diaspora* 1: 1, 1991, p. 83.