

Defying Societal Constraints in Kavita Daswani's *Salaam Paris*

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Abstract:

Feminism emerged in the early 20th century as a movement led by women to fight against gender discrimination, patriarchal oppression, and stereotypes. Stereotypes are generalizations about specific groups or communities and play a significant role in how women are perceived in society. They act as unwritten rules dictating how women should conform to societal norms. Feminism actively challenges these stereotypes and works towards achieving gender equality by questioning and transforming societal expectations that restrict individuals based on gender.

Kavita Daswani is a notable contemporary novelist of Indian American diaspora literature. She deals with the complexities of identity and culture through her literary work. She also sheds light on how Indian women negotiate their roles and customs within a stereotypical society. The novel *Salaam Paris* delves into the narrative of Tanaya, a young woman who desires to explore the world and establish her individuality rather than conform to societal expectations of marriage. Tanaya embarks on a journey to pursue her aspirations, facing criticism and resistance from the stereotypical men. This research paper aims to shed light on the stereotypical society Tanaya encounters as she challenges traditional gender roles and strives to break free from the limitations imposed by stereotypes.

Keywords: Diaspora, Tradition, Stereotype, Identity, Feminism

The Vedic era is the golden age of women in India. The status of women flourished and was treated equally to men. They had equal opportunities in all areas, including education, without facing discrimination. The *Rig Veda* emphasizes the significance of educating girls. Society in the Vedic period recognized the value of knowledge and arts for

women, teaching them music, dance, and even combat skills for self-defence. Women also played a crucial role in performing rituals and chanting hymns for the gods. There was a time when a man could only perform Vedic sacrifices if his wife stood by his side. Besides participating in religious activities, women were also involved in warfare. There are legends of warrior queens like Vispala, who fought alongside her husband, King Khela and even received an iron leg from the Asvins after losing her own in battle to continue fighting. Another legend tells the story of Mudgalani, the wife of a sage, who chased and fought against robbers who had stolen their cow. She drove the chariot for her husband and, wielding his bow and arrow, fought off the robbers, successfully recovering their cow. These examples illustrate that women during the Vedic period were not confined to their homes, and their roles extended beyond domestic boundaries.

Over time, women's status has degraded due to various factors and cultural influences, such as the Aryan and British invasions, which introduced their own cultures into Indian society. As the years passed, these influences adulterated the original Indian culture and its traditions and norms. India's authentic tradition and culture have been lost and altered through the ages. Consequently, women started facing oppression and degradation. They were confined to their homes, resulting in silencing their voices. In response, women began to speak up to reclaim their rights and support equality, leading to the emergence of the feminist movement in the twentieth century.

The feminist movement originated in the West with Mary Wollstonecraft's influential work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in 1792. Wollstonecraft passionately advocated for equality and equal opportunities for women in education and politics, emphasizing the need for society to recognize women as human beings. Her ideas inspired many women writers, including Simone de Beauvoir, whose notable contribution, *The Second Sex*, profoundly impacted the women's liberation movement.

The cultures in the West and the East are different from each other. It is essential to recognize that theories and concepts developed in the Western context may not seamlessly apply to Eastern culture. Many Western feminist ideas may not resonate with Eastern women. For example, a radical feminist perspective that criticizes motherhood as a hindrance to women's freedom and advocates for unrestricted access to abortion originated in the West. However, when the right to abortion was granted to women in India, it resulted in the unfortunate consequence of female feticide. To address this issue, the government had to establish regulations to prevent such practices. Consequently, women in different countries and cultures face unique forms of oppression.

In contemporary India, women are confined to gender roles imposed by society and women who deviate from these expectations often face societal shame. In India, women frequently face the stereotype of being expected to surrender to the traditional gender role of homemakers and being subordinate to men. This stereotype often restricts their educational and career opportunities. Additionally, societal expectations prioritise their roles as wives and mothers over their professional aspirations, which can hinder their financial independence

due to unemployment. Another stereotype that Indian women encounter relates to their choice of clothing, emphasising modesty to uphold the family honour. These societal stereotypes are effectively portrayed in the novel *Salaam Paris* by Indian American author Kavita Daswani.

Kavita Daswani, an author from Mumbai, is part of the Diaspora community. After growing up in Hong Kong, she relocated to Los Angeles following her marriage. Currently, she holds the position of a fashion correspondent for CNN International, Women's Daily Wear, and CNBA Asia. Her writing career commenced with the publication of her debut novel, *For Matrimonial Purposes*, in 2003. Subsequently, in 2006, she released two more novels titled *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills* and *Salaam Paris*. Additionally, Daswani has authored several other novels such as *Indie Girl*, *Bombay Girl*, and *Love Torn*.

The novel *Salaam Paris* is about a girl named Tanaya. Kavita Daswani, through the girl Tanaya, portrays how a girl of nineteen years old struggles and sacrifices her family due to the society of stereotypes. The community Tanaya lives in has laid down unwritten rules for women on how they must lead their life. Parents and society frequently shield their daughters from the world's harsh realities, fearing they might develop a longing to venture beyond familiar boundaries. Their wish is for their daughters to be confined to the traditional roles of devoted wife and caretaker. Tanaya's grandfather was no different from the people in the society. When Tanaya reaches the age of sixteen, he says, "I believe it is time to settle your mind on the only role you have in this world: a pretty and quiet wife and a devoted mother. Remember that, and you will always be happy." (Daswani, 5). He wanted her to get married and settle down with a child; that is her only role in life and the way to be happy. At that time, the unwritten rules of society started to pull Tanaya into the system created by society for women. Tanaya understood that her grandfather planned her future solely as a wife and mother and nothing beyond that. That understanding of society wanted her to move to Paris to pursue her dream of participating in the world instead of confining herself to the rules and staying within the boundary that her society had built for her.

When Tanaya goes to Paris and when she thinks back to what would happen to her life if she returned to India, "All the girls in my neighborhood went there if marriage was for any reason delayed, and six months later "graduated" with important knowledge such as how to pickle lemons, how to remove stains from limestone, and how to iron a man's shirt best" (Daswani, 34). This was the life that was created for women by the people. When a girl finishes school, she must attend a domestic school where they would teach them how to make pickles and iron man's shirts till, she finds a groom. After marriage, she must give birth to children and care for the family. Girls are educated on how to take care of their husband and family even before she is married because their life is destined by society to be confined only to their family and home and not beyond that.

The longing for being independent and getting an identity can be observed in her friend Nilu and Aunt Gaura. Nilu is proud of Tanaya when she breaks free of the system the society has created for women. She praises her by saying,

You know, I am now at Mrs. Mehra's School of Domesticity? Where else would I go? But you have escaped all that. You are doing what I knew you always could. You are making your own money and creating your own name, no more just Zakir Shah's beautiful granddaughter from flat 1B. (Daswani, 136)

Nilu is Tanaya's friend in India, and it is with her that Tanaya used to read *Teen Cosmo* magazines, and it is she who sparked the idea in Tanaya that she would do good in modelling. Nilu's life is how Tanaya would have been if she was not brave enough to grab the opportunity when the alliance from a lawyer Tariq in Paris came. The longing and the ache to get an identity of her own can be observed in her words of Nilu. Instead of relying on her father or husband, Tanaya made her own money, making Nilu proud of Tanaya. By uttering 'you have escaped all that', she mentions that Tanaya has escaped the unwritten rules women had to follow in that society.

Aunt Gaura is another woman who has lost her life to the rules of society. Tanaya returned to India when she heard the news that her grandfather has met with an accident. She went to her home, but her mother slapped her and did not allow her inside the home to see her grandfather. It was Aunt Gaura who helped Tanaya in convincing her mother. Like Nilu's Aunt Gaura also felt proud of her and said, "When I was your age, I was married with a child on the way. I would never have been able to afford even a cup of tea here, much less to stay here on my own. You have broken every rule of our family." (Daswani, 193). Aunt Gaura recalls her youth age when she was like Tanaya and was delighted to find out what Tanaya has achieved.

Indians pride themselves on their religion and community. For most Indians, pride and respect are more important than any other thing. It was to the extent that honour killing has been practised in India for many years. Society has conditioned the mind of people as nothing is more important than honour or respect, which was the reason for the hatred and anger of Tanaya's grandfather. Her grandfather was conditioned by society, and it blinded him when he found out that Tanaya was not coming back to India as planned. His words to her were so cruel and heart-wrenching. He called her bitch, mad cow, whore and said that someone would rape and kill her when Tanaya informed him that she was not returning to India. When Tanaya became a model, he sent her a letter and expressed his disappointment and disapproval of her decision to live in Paris, labelling her shameless and horrible. He said, "It is like you were never even my child." (Daswani, 67). Though honour and pride blind him, his love for her does not allow him to stop thinking of her. He said to her on the phone, "You are already dead to me." (Daswani, 36) Then again, he posted her a letter full of criticism and then again after, months later, he got into an accident when he went to post a letter from her father to Tanaya. Finally, when he was crippled in bed, his love for her made him forgive her, but the honour and pride that blinded him made him disappointed, and the bond he shared with her was lost.

Throughout the novel, Tanaya's mind is always in India with her grandfather, and not even a day has passed without her thinking about him. The stereotype and the rules of society for women made Tanaya lose her family forever. Despite her success, Tanaya's story didn't

have a happy ending. She carried the guilt of leaving her home behind, and her family criticized and expressed disappointment in her, preventing her from finding peace.

While Aunt Gaura explains that Tanaya's Grandfather's behaviour is influenced by his generation, Tariq, who belongs to Tanaya's own generation, is also affected by society's stereotypical views. Tariq's accusations against Tanaya stem from his deeply ingrained stereotypical views about women. He judges her choices based on societal stereotypes, failing to see beyond the surface and understand her true motivations. When he encounters her in Paris, he confronts her with questions like, "This taking off your clothes for the world to see? This sleeping with a strange white man who plays music for a living? What kind of behavior is that for a decent girl?" (Daswani, 166). However, Tanaya's profession as a model necessitates creating an image that includes having a boyfriend, which leads her to choose a gay partner as a facade. He judges her choices based on societal stereotypes, failing to see beyond the surface and understand her true motivations. Tariq's belief that Tanaya's profession as a model automatically equates to immoral behaviour that reflects the prevalent stereotype that associates modelling with promiscuity. His comments about Tanaya taking off her clothes and being involved with a white musician highlight his narrow-minded perspective. Instead of seeking to understand her aspirations and the demands of her profession, he unfairly labels her as indecent and improper. Tariq's stereotypical view of women limits his ability to empathize with Tanaya's experiences and undermines her autonomy and personal growth.

When Tariq criticized Tanaya for leaving her family behind to pursue a career in modelling in Paris, Tanaya bravely expressed her frustrations and thoughts to him. She confronted him, saying,

"It's easy for you to preach on about family blessings," I said. "You have always had them. No matter what you decided to do, you would always have them. Go to law school, go to med school, stay home and become an auto mechanic. Your parents would never have cursed you with Allah's wrath because you are a man. You were meant to go out and conquer the world. But if a girl tries to do it, suddenly there are accusations of betrayal and threats of being disowned. I couldn't even walk out of my apartment building without being followed by Nana. But you? You could study in America, work in London, move to Paris, whatever you wanted. Why? Because you are a boy and I am not?" (Daswani, 166)

Tanaya represents the voice of girls and women whose aspirations are hindered by stereotypes. In her pursuit of freedom, she moved to Paris and faced the challenges of being part of a diaspora. She experienced isolation in an unfamiliar environment, and not a day passed without her thoughts drifting towards India and her family. Her family rejected her because she decided to break free from society's predetermined roles. Kavita Daswani's portrayal of Tanaya highlights the challenges faced by Indian women as they navigate their journey towards personal freedom amidst the constraints of societal stereotypes.

End Note.

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