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Managing domestic life and dream career in Kavita Daswani's *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills*

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Abstract---Kavita Daswani's second novel *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills*, also published as *Everything Happen for a Reason* is one of her romantic comedies. The novel deals with Priya married to Sanjay. After marriage she moves to Los Angeles with her husband. In America she encounters her husband's demanding parents, who want her to be a good Indian wife, and is expected to fulfill all the needs of his family members. Priya wants to be a journalist, but her husband's family forbids it. She eventually takes a job as a receptionist at a *Hollywood Gossip* magazine. She turns herself as an American by wearing western attire and begins to rethink the role of women in society and her role as a wife. When she gets a chance to interview a Hollywood star, she becomes a successful reporter. Her new career sets her newly found views of her family and husband, leading to confrontation.

Keywords---alienation, domesticity, migration, rootlessness, self-identity.

Introduction

This paper discusses how the women are pushed in to domestic activity by the family members and also how the job opportunities change their life style in to a successful way. This idea is clearly expressed by Daswani through her protagonist, Priya, whose career plays a wonderful role to decide who an ideal woman is, and why she needs to be a good-looking, educated, smart girl in the community. The life of Priya as an Indian woman in Hollywood is the best example of a reinvented identity. Society always restricts everyone in the name of customs and tradition but generation through generation one can notice the changes possible. There is a continuous change in the structure, acceptance, adaptability, opportunities, lifestyles, etc. Now-a-days women are strong, smart,

and ready to accept the changes to develop their own personality. Women feel empowered which enables them to stand on their own legs. They are strong even in a foreign land.

In the novel, the protagonist travels from her homeland to foreign country and re-invent her identity which is narrated in a sweet and sharp manner throughout the novel. The novel talks about a young Indian woman in her late 20s, Priya. Her parents do not encourage her career and life, not holding her back from the benefits of today's society. There is a restriction to go out from the house and they never allow her to mingle with their own community. She is married to Sanjay and moves to America to lead her marriage life happily. She is new to his family and environment. But ironically she is expected to remain as an obedient daughter-in-law to fulfill all the needs in his family. She comes from an Indian middle class family. Daswani suggests the influence of the media towards women who travel far and wide away from their homeland but try their best to maintain some kind of enduring bond with their native land.

In India, men are free from the cultural and social norms whereas women find themselves tied to the socio-cultural rigidities. The cultural taboos become comfort zones for Indian women gradually. Women are the carriers, protectors, and preservers of culture and cultural heritage. In the parochial society, man is free from the compulsions of culture and cultural markers. A woman is amuleted by man. The cultural markers like mangalsutra, the vermilion, the parted hair, and bindi, tinklets around the ankles, the saris, and the bangles are some of the cultural markers of women. These markers also make women to be aware that they are women and are an inseparable part of a culture. Further, these markers also make women as social constructs. Mishra identifies the primal wound of dislocation in terms of memories and trauma, "For after all, ...diasporas remind nation-states in particular about their own pasts, about their own earlier migration patterns, about their traumatic moments, about their memories, their own repressed pain and wounds, about their own prior and prioritized enjoyment of the nation" (19).

America is a country of migrants where people from all over the world gather together for various purposes. It is a dense metropolis population with an array of crisis. Meena Alexander, a renowned novelist and poet and a member of Indian Diaspora exemplifies in her interview, the difficulties of Indian women in American continent. These are the same problems faced probably by the protagonists of Kavita Daswani who are the working women. In one of her interviews Alexander opines:

The question of identity that face me as an Indian women, living and working in New York City, a dense, compacted, racist metropolis, where immigrants from all over the world have poured in, are inseparable from an intimate violence that has entered my probing into the bonds that link inner and outer realms, self and world. (3)

Women in India are represented with the red vermilion dot on their foreheads and a sindoor is to protect one's modesty. Priya goes to the United States in a daze. She does not know what this new society constitutes. She enters this new

life filled with the eternal blessings of her father and mother. She starts to play her vital role as an ideal obedient wife, cooking, cleaning, and does whatever the family members expect her to do. She says “My most important role in this family was as housekeeper, cook, and general errand runner, duties that came along with my new position as wife and daughter-in-law” (EHR2).

Priya struggles to start her life in a new place with her in laws. She says her husband that “I’m supposed to see your parents as mine, but I don’t. This doesn’t feel like my home. What if this is a mistake, and we can’t get out of it? Then what?” (EHR6). Sanjay understands her situation and helps her to learn the technology and the gadgets inside the house how to use it. He wants her not to depend on him always, so he also makes her to manage alone herself with the American life. He sends her to gym and also to learn driving. He advises her to be an obedient wife “You just have to obey them, keep quiet, smile, and everything will be great, he said” (EHR17).

Priya’s mother-in-law says her to go for a job to settle the life in a peaceful manner because in India everything is so cheap but in America everything is so expensive “In America, everything always seems to be a struggle, what with terrifying taxes that you can’t corrupt way out of, and car registration, and electricity bills” (EHR22). She also feels that till now Priya doesn’t make her a grandmother, so she plans Priya can search for a better job “This is not India. In this country, everybody works” (EHR1). Priya by hearing her words wants to be very happy but she is in confused manner. Her mother-in-law is from traditional Hindu family, she doesn’t expect such words from her mother-in-law’s mouth because “That her primary profession was to serve her father and brothers in early life, and her husband and sons” (EHR1). She is the first woman in her family to go for a job. She is terrified instead of feeling happy to be an independent woman.

India has a strong family unit concept based on marriage. In a joint family elders act as counselors and problem shooters in the family and help to forge emotional bonding and maintain stability in relationship. The family is a training ground for the youngsters where the elders act as cushions and launch pads for them. When Priya gets degree in English literature, she reveals her dream to become a journalist to her father but her father refuses it. So she decides to express her wish as a fashion reporter to her husband and in-laws in a pleading manner. She expresses her dream but her in-laws reject her dream and advise her to find a simple job. She accepts their words and looks at her husband. He says nothing. She remembers the words of her nanny “Everything happens for a reason” (EHR 27). Now-a-days Priya realizes that marriage life is very hard; there are hundreds of things to do; there is no time to think about rest. She comments:

In many Hindu families, for a son to have his own home is somewhere between a scandal and a tragedy. Male children are born to care for their parents, and then they marry and bring a wife into the house. She is expected to be “homely”. In America, that means “not good-looking.” In India, it means “taking care of the home and being there all the time”- with the exception of dashing off to buy peas. (EHR21)

Priya's mother-in-law never allows her to put her feet even to rest for a second, though she behaves as a good Hindu wife doing her duty with devotion and a smiling face. She expresses her emotion as:

I set alarm clock for early the next day so I could get up and make tea for the family. Then I touched their feet, even if they had already gone to bed. Between that and picking up the trail of clothes and other items Sanjay would leave in his wake, I knew I would be spending much of my marriage at ninety-degree angle. I was a good Hindu wife, dutiful, devoted, and always smiling. And now, I was to go and find a job. (EHR24)

Sanjay takes Priya to meet his friends and their wives, who all are Indians. She goes out with him with a lot of expectations and eagerness that she goes to meet Indian people in America. But they all look her from top to bottom and pretend to be very proud as a working woman. They all talk about their western dress, office, and gossip about others. They all forget to wear their traditional dress and forget that they are new to America. Before visiting them Priya feels very happy for she is going to get new friends and getting back her sisters in India. Now she understands though they are Indian girls, they are American now. She reveals:

They wore smart Western clothes, and seemed to have forgotten the days when they were new to America from India, and had dressed traditionally, just like me. I knew when I met them that they would never become my real friends, because whenever I saw them they made me long to be with my sisters again. They were Indian girls, but American now. (EHR24)

Now Priya is ready to find a new job. In India labor charge is cheap, but in America everything is expensive, every where there is a terrifying tax, in the name of car registration, electricity bill, etc. She thanks God that her mother brought up her daughters by teaching all the domestic activity in the house. She remembers the words of her grandmother who used to say her that nobody wants to marry working women. If Priya is lucky, her husband will permit her to go for a job as her wish.

Sanjay's parents encourage her to get a job to add to the family income, but are firm about their requirements, the job should be respectable, and she should dress properly and fulfill all her house hold duties of cooking and cleaning after her work. She finally gets a job as a receptionist at a glamorous Hollywood magazine.

Priya's mother-in-law insists her to go for a job to settle her daughter's life in a good manner. She has no concern about Priya, who is a woman like her. She uses Priya for her domestic purpose and financial growth. Priya wants to wear modern dresses and she says Sanjay that "I know it's my first day and all, but I think I'll be needing some new clothes. The people who work there are very fashionable... We'll talk to Mummy and Papa about it and get their permission. You know how they feel about Western clothes" (EHR45). Here Daswani reveals that her protagonist is ready to change her attitude and dressing sense based on the new culture with the support of her husband. But her in-laws reject her wish and say there is nothing wrong to wear traditional dress. Priya hesitate the attitude of her

family members, she looks towards her husband but he remains speechless and does not support her. Her mother-in-law offers her old dresses to Priya. She starts to wear with a proud thought of wearing western dress. Sanjay's sister Malini is a beautician but she also does not support her rather she treats indirectly in a cheap manner. Once when Priya wears her mother-in-law's dress she comments that:

Lucky magazine just did a big spread on it. Everything old is new again. You know, this stuff sells for a fortune in those stores on Melrose... But I should have taken her snigger, as I left the house, as a hint. Instead of her customary "Have a great day, *bhabi*," she ran to hide in the kitchen, her face in her handkerchief, as I walked by her. I'd thought that perhaps she was trying to stifle a sneeze. And it wasn't until I was at my desk, a few hours later, that I fully understood what all the hilarity was about. (EHR79)

Everyone in the office starts to laugh at Priya looking at the way of her dressing sense. So she runs towards Shanisse, who is not able to control her smile. Priya looks helpless and says "I shook my head, confused and tearful. I just wanted to fit in, I said" (EHR81). Shanisse takes her to purchase the western dress, she advises her to open a locker in the gym to keep her dresses. She gives the idea to change her western dress while coming home from the office. Priya comes back home in the traditional dress as an Indian woman. Which vividly depicts how the India women change their attitude of droning according to their whims and fancies of the in-laws.

In the office she follows the lifestyle of the host country. This change brings a lot of friends and respect to her, "Wow, Priya, you look wonderful! She exclaimed. What a huge difference! We did good, girl! Now you look like you belong here!" (EHR85). The person who comes to enquire about magazine starts to laugh at her. She enjoys her lifestyle in America but inside the house she is under the domestic pressure. She likes her change and admires her own beauty that "I had felt this pretty was on my wedding day. And this time, it was for real" (EHR82).

Shanisse acts as an inspirator to Priya because she compels and motivates her to interview a famous director, Mr. Rex Hauser. She interviews him with the questions prepared by Shanisse for which he answers in a drunkard manner. He reveals the cruel character and the attitude of his heroine. She comes back to her office and informs to Shanisse that "He was so drunk I don't think he knew what he was saying, and he was really, really nasty about Tamara Divan" (EHR98).

Shanisse discusses the message about the interview with Rex to the magazine *Weekly Buzz* for money. By understanding the attitude of Shanisse, she advises her to be sincere in *Hollywood* magazine. Rex comes forward and asks the tape recorder of his interview, he is ready to pay for it. He says "Cash? How much?" (EHR103). Priya replies politely that "There is no need for any of this. I am aware of the stresses you are under. You didn't have to come all the way down here to explain yourself, or offer to pay me not to use that inappropriate material. I was never going to. As far as I am concerned, not only is it forgotten but it never even happened" (HER104). These words touch the heart of Rex and he request the *Hollywood* chief editor Mr. Bailey to give promotion for Priya as a journalist.

Priya rejects the opportunity that she has no experience in journalism but Bailey advises her to accept the position and to improve herself in the field of journalism. So she starts to work hard to improve her writing skill. In a short period, her character brings a good future for her; she attains her dream as a journalist. Then she is promoted as a movie-star interviewer in a magazine; then she is appointed as a movie correspondent. She wants to reveal her promotion and the increment to her family members, especially her husband. Predictably, her home life heads downwards as her career starts raising. Her in laws are grimly conventional, old-fashioned, and unpleasant. Her husband, who is occasionally affectionate in the early days of their marriage, turns out to be self-centered and childish.

Priya who leads a secret life understands that her marriage life is in trouble. So she wants to change the character of her husband but all her actions and steps ends in vain. Sanjay says that her attitude is fully changed after the collaboration with the white people. She gets the feeling of satisfaction from her work. Inside the house, her mother-in-law waits for her to instruct the house hold works. She has no time to take rest till midnight.

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 makes every possible attempt to save her marriage, "because the only thing worse than being a single woman in India is being divorced one" (EHR196). There is a lot of pressure put by the society on the married women 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" (EHR197).

Priya's parents have their own house in Delhi where she along with her three elder sisters shelter. They are given a proper unspoiled upbringing. 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 to India, her homeland, because "everything hurts, and [she] just want[s] to be with [her] parents" (EHR 249). Her longing to join her family in India construes that India offers her feeling of security. 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).

Priya is identified first as a married woman because she dresses like one with sindhoor and a mangalsutra and then goes through a complete physical and mental make over 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, for which she 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" (EHR18) and a "light-blue-with-

black-trim salwar kameez” (EHR48). In the work place Priya feels ugly and different when her colleagues tell her that she looks “like a gypsy on speed” (EHR 81).

Shanisse, Priya’s friend at work, takes Priya for a western make-over and gets new clothes, make-up, and a hair-cut. Afterwards, Priya feels “as attractive as Malini, or even Brooke Shields” (EHR83). Thus Priya’s identity develops 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. According to Daswani transformation and difference in attitude really does the trick.

Priya’s accomplishment at work gives her a feeling of satisfaction which she cannot share with her husband and in-laws. She feels that she is “little better than an oppressed village bride who had to have a secret life for her sanity” (EHR 149). Priya is a fashion correspondent, earning more than her husband. Being a journalist is Priya’s lifelong dream, but her father-in-law disapproves the profession. As a dutiful daughter-in-law, Priya has to manage domestic life. As journalism is a demanding career, at times when she is extremely tired after a whole day’s work in the office she has to come home and do the mantle of a house-maker. She realizes that her father-in-law “had obviously had a point when he decreed that journalism would be a terrible career for me. How could I be there for that, and be there for them as well” (EHR159).

Priya finds herself in an increasingly unhappy position due to her husband’s attitude. He takes her for granted and ignores her desires and feelings. Priya tries to make things work and takes every possible attempt to save her marriage, “because the only thing worse than being a single woman in India is being divorced one” (EHR 196). There is lot of pressure put by the society on the women to remain in the male chauvinistic domestic atmosphere even leading an unhappy relationship in the family. Priya is aware of the Indian culture, 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” (EHR 197).

Priya tries to talk and convince Sanjay, her husband, about the need to continue and maintain their relationship in order to make it happy and meaningful. She never intends to separate from him. “The word “home” immediately connotes the private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture and protection” (1).

The women characters of Daswani have double bind situation, male dominant patriarchal society and their life in the diasporic space. Their struggle for assimilation in new and modern culture and at the same time their feelings and nostalgia about traditional home culture alienate them in the host land. Her protagonist, Priya confronts various problems in new country but she also proclaims her identity. Her protagonists from the different socio-economic

background who settle in United States of America with the hope of bright future are trapped between two nations and two cultures in the hostland.

Priya accords her success to God, which is also a part of tradition, as she points out, "I was offered it, through some great good fortune that I will never be able to explain. Where I come from, we believe that God only knocks on your door once" (EHR157). She gets the chance to carve a separate identity of her own, breaking away from her stereotypical role as a traditional Indian daughter-in-law to a new identity of a successful, American celebrated journalist.

Priya's complete shift in identity comes when she decides to break up with Sanjay. She understands that it is impossible to maintain two identities together; so she shifts to her new flat and seeks new opportunities in life. Sanjay's family tries to reconcile her with Sanjay, but she feels complete alienation from her family, her native tradition, and cultural values. Kavita Daswani highlights the 'othering' process of these ethnic, trans-cultural, and women as alienated from their families and true selves. The dominant culture does not embrace them.

This lack of personality, unfortunately, extends to all the characters, the parents, the husband, the sister-in-law, the boss, and also the envious colleagues. This lucky character has one distinguishing trait, unpleasantness, but no other signs of humanity. Through her work, Daswani pin points that whatever happens it is in every ones' hand; it is the gift of God. So everyone must save the gift till the end of their life. Priya decides to leave her husband but in her inner heart she wants to save her marriage life. At last she succeeds in it. The only solution to save the entire gift is to adjust or to face it.

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