CHAPTER 5

RESTAGING THE CULTURAL PAST/PRESENT IN THE NOVELS OF KAVITA DASWANI

All third – world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way they are to be read as what I will call *national allegories.* (Jameson: 1986)

Kavita Daswani, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, - these women writers of Indian diaspora substantiate Jameson's claim that their novels are national allegories of the Indian nation retold through the eyes of their female protagonists. Though Aijaz Ahmad is quite right in vehemently opposing the homogenizing nature of Jameson's statement, but the novels and short story collections of these diasporic women writers prove Jameson's statement right, as their novels and short stories are resonant of a national allegory of the Indian nation. They prove Jameson's claim that "*the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*" (1986: 69).

One of the defining principles of cultural identity in the modern world is the national culture into which an individual is born. National identity is not a thing that the individual is born with, but something 'formed and transformed within and in relation to *representation*' and hence, "It follows that a nation is not only a political entity but something which produces meanings – *a system of cultural representation*. People are not only legal citizens of a nation; they participate in the *idea* of the nation as represented in its national culture. A nation is a symbolic community and it is this which accounts for its 'power to generate a sense of identity and allegiance'" (Hall 292). National cultures are not composed of only cultural institutions but also of symbols and representations. However, according to the Penguin Dictionary of Sociology, a national culture is a *discourse* – which enables a way of constructing

meanings that influence and organize both the actions and the conception of one's own self. Identities are constructed by national cultures by 'producing meanings about the nation' with which the subject can identify. These meanings are constructed through stories about the nation, memories connecting its present to its past and the images constructed by it (Hall 293). These women writers draw heavily on the various cultural aspects and traditions of the Indian nation in the depiction of the struggles their protagonists undergo at home and in the alien culture of America. 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.

What is this identity in question here? In the post-modern period the identity of a subject is dislocated and decentred. This has happened due to the fragmenting of the 'cultural landscapes of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race and nationality' which root us firmly as social individuals (Hall 275). According to Hall, the post-modern subject has 'no fixed, essential or permanent identity' and thus, "The fully unified, completed, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy. Instead, as the systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting and multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with – at least temporarily" (Hall 277). However, the character of these social practices is undergoing change across the globe, due to globalization. The transformations ushered in by modernity have, according to Hall 'tore the individual free from its stable moorings in traditions and structures' (Hall 281). There is a 'celebration of multiplicities' which enables adaptation of identities from many sources and not only from the pre-colonial past, as Nayar reiterates:

> Assaulted by multiple historical, cultural and political forces, the migrant usually appropriates several identities. Diasporic literature explores identities forged in the crucible of multiple cultures, cities, and races rather than just 'home' and 'alien land'. (201)

The nation is narrated in the novels of these diasporic women writers by the repeated performance of the traditions and cultural customs. This feature of cultural nationalism is resonant of what Bhabha terms as the 'performative' aspect of nationalist discourse. The culture of a nation should be 'continually rehearsed' and 'endlessly performed' in order to "keep secure the sense of 'deep, horizontal comradeship'" (McLeod 118), as Bhabha points out, "The scraps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a coherent national culture" (145). However, this performative aspect of culture and traditions does not keep them fossilized in a stereotypical identity, but 'performativity keeps reminding us that the nation and the people are always generating a non-identical excess over and above what we thought they were" (Huddart 109).

Kavita Daswani is comparatively a new writer amongst the women writers of the Indian diaspora settled in the USA. She works as a fashion correspondent for CNN International, CNBC Asia, and Women's Daily Wear. She has written for the Los Angeles Times and the International Herald Tribune. She has also been the fashion editor in the South China Morning Post in Hong Kong. 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. Anju, in *For Matrimonial Purposes*, is thirty-three and is waiting to find the perfect alliance. Priya, in *Everything Happens for a Reason*, is a newlywed bride and moves to the US with her husband and in-laws. Tanaya, in *Salaam Paris*, wants to move out of her old, gloomy and stifling surroundings. She wants to visit Paris to experience her '*Sabrina moment*', but her grandfather wants her to marry like 'every good girl from respectable families and settle down in domesticity. The performance of some of the stereotypical traditions, the pressures exerted by them suppress and suffocate the individuality of these protagonists to the extent that there is a need and sense of urgency to find 'the in-between space' where they are able to create an identity for self, that gives them a sense of freedom. The new found independence of Anju, Priya and Tanaya, the protagonists of Daswani's three novels, however, is not at the cost of their cultural values.

For Matrimonial Purposes focuses on the issue of arranged marriage for Anju who has crossed the marriageable age and has not yet been able to find a suitable alliance within her community. She goes to America on the pretext of studies and in the hope of finding an alliance faster than at home, in India. Though time passes by there are no suitable alliances coming her way, but she succeeds professionally as a fashion reporter. Her profession gives her an independent identity, which she is proud of, but at the same time is aware of her parent's angst and her own loneliness, and desire to marry. The protagonists on one hand perform the cultural traditions and customs as a part of their nationalist consciousness and identity while on the other hand they also create the much required 'third-space of enunciation', as Bhabha terms it, for themselves in the host country away from home.

> In postcolonial times, in the contest between tradition and modernity, the woman is held to be the repository of all that is 'good' in the culture's traditions, even as colonial/postcolonial modernity and tradition seek power over the familial and domestic space. (Nayar 125)

The title of Daswani's first novel is indicative of its theme, that is, marriage. The opening lines of the novel announce it aptly:

> My grandmother was married off two days shy of her tenth birthday. My mother found a husband when she was twenty. I thus reckoned that if every generation increased by a decade the acceptable age for marriage, I should have become a wife by thirty. But at thirty-three, I was nowhere close to being married. (FMP 5)

In the Indian tradition, marriage as an institution has great importance especially for the girls. It is an age-old tradition that has been carried out for generations from the past to the present. Marrying off the daughter at the right age is a matter of great concern for the parents because the whole process is a huge complicated ritual in the Indian society, which begins with the 'Great Official Husband-Hunt', as Anju terms it.

> But I also knew that in the view of my society, a woman was never much of anything until the day she got married. She was always a

> guest in her parents' home, they were her temporary caretakers. When the right man came, regardless of where or how he lived, this young, single woman would wrap her life around his. (FMP 29)

There is a lot of pressure and desperation to find an alliance for their daughters in their own community. Marrying in one's own community was again an unbroken tradition in the Indian culture. This is reflected in Priya's wistful recollection of how her parents' joy had faded when they could not get suitable alliances for her three elder sisters by the time she, the youngest of all, was of marriageable age (EHR 58).

Sometimes this desperation is tantamount to blind beliefs and superstition, for instance, Priya accords the reason for her elder sisters' being unmarried to the names given to them which began with an 'R…' sound which the 'family priest had cautioned my parents against giving any of us' (EHR, 58-59). Priya is convinced that she got married before her elder sisters because of her name which did not begin with 'R…'. The belief in birth charts – '*chhati*', shown to astrologers, swamijis, who made predictions of good marriage offers or reasons, ranging from evil spirits, displeased Gods to '*grehchari*' – unhappy souls of ancestors, who might have put a curse on the daughters of the family, being the reason for the girl being unmarried in spite of best of intentions and efforts.

> My mother became a woman possessed by the Demon of Husband-Hunters. In the months that followed, she and my father took me on four pilgrimages across India and to visit any swami/saint/guru/healer/astrologer she could drum up. We drove for six hours to get to Shirdi, flew to Puttaparthi, trekked to Vaishnudevi and rattled along by railway to Rishikesh and Haridwar. (FMP, 96).

In addition to all this, Anju is coerced into fasting on Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays for weeks or months to appease Gods and Goddesses. She is also made to wear 'marriage-inducing accoutrements' which would 'help redirect the planetary energies' around her to 'battle karmic ills and emerge victorious, brandishing a good husband as the prize" (FMP 99-100). Though these superstitious beliefs and customs sound funny and ridiculous; unfortunately they have been a part of the traditions from

past. “Marriage, suggest numerous writers, does not guarantee the safety of home or a clear identity for the women. Many women writers in India, for instance, emphasize that marriage might indeed be detrimental to the woman’s identity… She subsumes her identity under that of the family” (Nayar, 13).

Time and again Anju is reminded of her duties as an obedient daughter belonging to a good family. The performance of traditional duties of a daughter are aptly depicted by Anju in the way she introduces her cousin Namrata, who is eighteen and ready to be a good wife. She, like her newly wedded sister could sing anything from Hindi film songs to *bhajans*. She was ready for domesticity, trained in ‘how to pickle lemons and fry *papads* perfectly’. According to Anju, she is every Indian males dream wife with soft, fair complexion and properly primed (FMP 16-17). Domesticity is considered the only goal of an Indian woman’s life and therefore each one of them is trained and indoctrinated from an early age for a life of domesticity. For instance, Tanaya is repeatedly told by her grandfather that the only role assigned for her was that of ‘a pretty and quiet wife and a devoted mother’ (SP 5). A similar opinion is echoed by Anju who points out that she was taught ‘everything needed to be a good wife’ (FMP 65) by her mother, and Priya is thankful to her mother for grooming her and her sisters for what she calls ‘domestic life’ (EHR 24). The indoctrination is so deep and lasting that it becomes the ultimate goal of their lives, as Anju points out, “I was oddly drawn to the age-old system of arranged marriage – it seemed exotic somehow, noble, and fragile. Observing the tradition would elevate me to the highest ranking on the scale of social conduct; when a girl marries a man her family members select for her it is the ultimate act of piety, and, according to tradition, would bring many, many blessings” (FMP 25). Tanaya, who becomes a famous international model resonates a similar view when she informs Tariq, the man chosen by her grandfather for her, that her life had not changed much inspite being a successful model. Like every woman in her extended family she too would wait to give off herself on her wedding night.

The post-marriage scenario is still deplorable; a traditional Indian wife’s ‘primary profession was to serve her father and brothers in early life, and her husband and sons

later' (EHR 1). Priya is brought up in a family where women never worked. She is prepared and trained for her new position as a wife and a daughter-in-law, but had never imagined that her mother-in-law, whom she considered to be 'a ferocious guardian of tradition' (EHR 2), would ask her to find a job. Priya knew that she was marrying into 'a traditional joint Hindu family, two generations under one roof', which she didn't find intimidating as her parents had done the same back in Delhi, and knew her traditional duties as the daughter-in-law as she points out:

> 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 India, it means 'taking care of the home and being there all the time' – with the exception of dashing off to buy peas" (EHR 23).

A similar opinion is voiced by Tanaya who expects to be married some day to a man who would give her some allowance to buy vegetables and pay for laundry (SP 142). Anju talks disparagingly about Puran, who had shown some interest in marrying her; "And walking next to me was a man who only wanted to marry me because he needed to supplement his domestic task force" (FMP 41).

Distanced from the homeland, forced by choice o need to struggle to create a space of their own in an alien culture, the protagonists find the freedom they seek, and independence to forge an identity of their own. There is a sense of pride and determination to be a 'living proof', in the present, to show themselves, as Anju points out, 'the independent one, the successful, happy, living-for-herself one. The one not constricted by rules and husbands and mean mothers-in-law' (FMP 175). For Priya, her accomplishment at work gives her a feeling of satisfaction which she cannot share with her husband or in-laws. She felt that she was '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 was Priya's lifelong dream, but her father-in-law disapproved the profession for his daughter-in-law. As a dutiful daughter-in-law, Priya had to manage domestic chores, and journalism was a demanding career. Times when she is extremely tired after a

whole day's work at office and has to come home and don the mantle of a home-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?" (EHR 159)

Tanaya had just wanted to see the world before she settled in domesticity, but left alone suddenly in an alien country to fend for herself; she manages to become a successful international model by her hard work and conviction. Tanaya creates her present which is free of her constraining past.

> The girl that everyone wants. It felt unnatural to even think it, that a bunch of strangers, a group of fashion designers who had, until now, no correlation at all with my life would "want" me. My own mother hadn't wanted me. (SP 112)

Each of the protagonists, in Daswani's three novels scales the heights of success. They are appreciated and valued for their work, which boosts each one's morale, in spite of the fact that there is a tinge of sadness and a sense of lack in their personal lives, as Anju points out, "Mine had become a life lived on the outside. And if I tried to probe to see what was beneath it, there would only be concealed neuroses and petty jealousies and more dysfunction than I could deal with … I needed a change. And perhaps that change could begin with marriage" (FMP 53). 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 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' (EHR 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" (EHR 197). 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” (SP 158). For Anju marriage was the ultimate goal that would seal her happiness. Priya tries to talk and convince Sanjay, her husband, about the need to work on their relationship in order to make it happy and meaningful. She never intended to separate from him. Tanaya has seen and experienced the world but has not been able to experience her ‘Sabrina moment’, which lay hidden somewhere in her family’s forgivance, approval and acceptance.

In spite of all the achievements of the diaspora there is a sense of nostalgia for the homeland and a feeling of alienation in the host country. “The word “home” immediately connotes the private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture and protection” (Marangoly, 1). Time and again Anju, Priya and Tanaya remember with nostalgia their home and family back in India. 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. Anju grew up in an apartment on Warden Road in Mumbai, not far from sea, which her grandfather had bought after he fled to India from Pakistan during the partition. 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 Anju talks about her home when she comes to Bombay for a family wedding, “… the city where I was born and had spent most of my life. My parents and two brothers still lived here, in the same house that I knew as a child, a house conveniently located just minutes from major temples and hotels” (FMP 5). Priya feels at home in an Indian store in America, where customer service is not as sophisticated as in the other American stores. For Tanaya, home is where her nana and mother were; in Mumbai. In her transition from a simple, conservative Muslim girl to an international model; she never stops craving to go back home; - “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 …” (SP 61).

Neither in the process of becoming independent, nor much later when they are successful in their professions, are the protagonists bereft of the cultural values with which they are brought up. Giddens defines tradition as "a means of handling time and space, which inserts any particular activity or experience within the continuity of past, present and future, these in turn being structured by recurrent social practices" (Giddens 37-38). During testing times, in distress or confusion Anju, Priya and Tanaya hold on to their cultural values, traditions and religion, from which they gain courage and confidence to overcome difficulties. Tanaya preferred to drink apple juice, while her friends celebrated her success with champagne, because she knew it was a sin to consume alcohol in Islam. Prayer is the only means of solace for Tanaya when her mind is in turbulence. "Staring at the compass, I located the direction that, thousands of miles away across oceans, lay Mecca, our big, glorious, historic place of worship. Then . . . I lowered myself to the ground, closed my eyes, and prayed" (SP, 133). Anju constantly compares between the American values and her Indian cultural upbringing. In spite of living alone in America she is unable to transform herself completely into an American.

> They talked of spending weekends and going on vacations and it seemed to me as if they regarded this whole matter of dating and relating as if they were deciding what to wear every morning. Discretion and careful long-term choices were not part of the moral mix. Still rooted in my uptight, desperately upright Indian culture, I found that to be baffling (FMP, 156).

In a humorous way Anju adhered to religious constraints put on her, in the hope of finding a husband. In a lively discussion, Anju informs the group of girls with whom she has come to Paris for the Paris fashion week that she ate fish and chicken, but that day being Monday, a 'special day for us in religious terms', she refrained from meat and alcohol (FMP 272). Priya is scared of blighting her 'karma into infinity' by going against the Indian cultural values and beliefs she has been ingrained with from her childhood, such as 'repeating malicious gossip' which was as good as eavesdropping. Even when Priya is blamed of doing something immoral, which may be the reason for her sudden promotion from a receptionist to a journalist, she 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" (EHR 157).

In between the pressure to follow the traditions and cultural code of conduct and the new-found freedom, the protagonists are able to 'negotiate and articulate' a new identity, which, according to Nayar, gives them the confidence to 'abandon older, perhaps oppressive and limited forms of identity, in favour of a shifting and complex one' (201), as Bhabha suggests in his seminal book *Location of Culture*:

> The need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of self-hood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself (1-2).

An exposure to the open American culture, its values, and the new-found freedom enables the protagonists to form a new identity, which is beyond the constraints of stereotypical traditions of the past. This gives them the courage and confidence to face issues in personal life, this aspect is reflected, for instance, when Anju says, "There, in that tiny seven-person office in a non-descript building, I actually was someone that people wanted to talk to" (FMP 196). As Priya interviews the celebrities for *Hollywood Insider*, especially on their lives before they became stars, - when they were an altogether different personality, - aiming and struggling for something big in life, she realizes that she too 'had obviously been dying for a chance to be someone else' (EHR 171). She gets the chance to form a separate identity of her own, breaking away from her stereotypical role of a traditional Indian daughter-in-law to a new identity of a successful, celebrated journalist.

Paris, for Tanaya is her 'first escape' from her family, where she was 'discovered', and also where she discovered that she wasn't the girl she believed herself to be. Paris

was like a home to her, this is the place where she feels at home, as Mcleod states, "To be 'at home' is to occupy a location where we are welcome, where we can be with people very much like ourselves" (210). Tanaya met Shazia, her alter ego in Paris, who makes her realize what she was missing in her life, - namely freedom and a self-identity. Though Tanaya gets the much wanted freedom and becomes a successful international model, she is unable to experience her '*Sabrina moment'*, wherein she could claim that, *"I have learned how to live, how to be in the world and of the world, and not just to stand aside and watch"* (SP 10). She realizes her mistake in rejecting Tariq's alliance, the match her Nana had brought for her. However, she did not wish to be the 'meek wife' her grandfather wanted her to be. The new-found freedom, identity and fame give her the confidence to choose, as she points out:

> That life, the one that Nana had in his mind for me, it wasn't what I wanted. Not at nineteen. And then everything happened, and I went along with it, loving it as I went, making these choices that would once have been incomprehensible. There have been struggles, but so much of it has made me, well, *happy*. (SP 214)

Though she did not aspire to be an international model, her experiences taught her what the real world was like. She realizes that what she did was 'unconventional', that she had 'contravened' her culture and upbringing, but in turn the experience imbibes in her a deep faith in her cultural traditions, which earlier she seemed to ignore. She is confident and has forged an identity of her own in contrast to the meek, subservient wife her grandfather wanted her to be.

Here, the attempt is not to elevate the status of Indian women to being a 'national symbol', but to rather depict them as normal human beings with a voice and identity of their own. An identity which is free from the bondage of traditional stereotypical roles assigned to them. In spite of proving their feminine selves, and forging an identity of their own, they are not devoid of the moral values and beliefs with which they were brought up, which is so characteristic of the Indian culture. They prove their quintessential Indianness by performing their duty of upholding the cultural traditions and values. There is no conscious effort to highlight their sense of nationalism by the female protagonists of the novels, by these women writers. It is

their roots, belief in traditions and the Indian culture that is so strongly fixed in their psyche that makes their narrative a national allegory, Rosemary Marangoly consolidates the same:

> In the west today, the literature that is recognized as postcolonial is that produced by authors with a "Third World" affiliation. It is read as being chiefly concerned with issues of nationalism and/or national allegory as well as with articulating a critique of colonialism. Though written primarily in English … it is expected to *and does*, constantly translates itself by dexterously and continuously explaining the local allusions and cultural practices that are incorporated into the narrative" (171-72).

This is especially true about these women writers of Indian diaspora settled in the United States of America, who are dealt with here.

To conclude, according to Bhabha, *performance* is important as it serves as a 'means by which new, hybrid identities are negotiated'. The migrant standing at the border is 'empowered to intervene *actively* in the transmission of cultural inheritance or 'tradition (of both the home and host land)', instead of *passively* accepting its 'venerable customs and pedagogical wisdom'. The female protagonists of the three novels studied here have deeply ingrained the cultural values and morals. They respect the traditions which have been carried forward through generations. Like for instance, all three, Anju, Priya and Tanaya respected the institution of marriage and expected to play the traditional role of a wife at some point of time in their lives. However, they are not willing to embrace the stereotypical roles assigned to the role of a wife, which demanded them to sacrifice their independence and self-hood. They act as the agents of change. They design their destiny, seek a space of their own and create an identity for themselves which gives them a sense of fulfilment in life. Thus the migrant is authorized to act as an agent of change by establishing 'received knowledge' in the present and 'transforming it as a consequence'. However, this "does *not* mean that received or traditional knowledge becomes dismissed. Rather inherited knowledge can be reinscribed and given new unexpected meanings", - and

this action Bhabha terms as '**restaging the past**' (BPC 218-219), which the female protagonists are able to achieve successfully.

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