

# Straddling Cultures: The Intersection of Identity and Multiculturalism in *Salaam Paris*

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## Abstract

This paper delves into the intersection of identity and multiculturalism in Kavita Daswani's *Salaam Paris*, exploring how the novel illustrates the complexities of straddling cultures in a globalized world. Through the protagonist Tanaya Shah's journey, the narrative highlights the challenges faced by individuals caught between their cultural heritage and the pressures of assimilation. As Tanaya navigates her life in Paris, balancing her traditional Indian-Muslim upbringing with her aspirations in the Western fashion industry, the novel reflects the nuanced experience of diasporic identity. By examining Tanaya's struggles and growth, this paper sheds light on the broader implications of multiculturalism, identity negotiation, and the emotional conflicts that arise when straddling multiple cultural worlds. Ultimately, it underscores how *Salaam Paris* offers a powerful narrative about the search for self-understanding and belonging within the complexities of multicultural environments.

**Keywords:** Identity, Multiculturalism, Diaspora, Cultural conflict.

## Introduction

Literature acts as an essential perspective for understanding the intricacies of multiculturalism and diaspora. As our world becomes more interconnected and globalized, the experience of navigating different cultures has emerged as a significant motif in modern literature. In particular, diasporic narratives provide deep insights into the challenges related to identity, as individuals work to maintain their cultural legacies while adjusting to new societal standards. Kavita Daswani's *Salaam Paris* exemplifies this theme effectively, telling the tale of Tanaya Shah, a young Indian-Muslim woman who finds herself torn between her traditional upbringing and the enticing aspects of Western culture in Paris.

## Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is a concept that emphasizes the acknowledgment and appreciation of many cultural identities within a society. "Multiculturalism is the practice of giving importance to all cultures in a society and it includes people of several, different races, religions, languages and traditions" (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary). Bhikhu Parekh

in *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (2000) defines multiculturalism as a way of viewing human life. Parekh argues that a multicultural society is founded on the principle of granting equal rights to all cultural groups, regardless of their race, religion, or language.

The idea of multiculturalism gained prominence in the late 1960s and early 1970s, primarily as a response to the demand for equal rights for immigrants in Canada. This forward-thinking movement quickly gained traction, with Australia adopting comparable policies and both nations officially endorsing cultural diversity. As the initiative spread throughout Europe, influencing nations such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden, it ignited significant discussions concerning identity and belonging in increasingly diverse societies. In this framework, the experiences of diasporic communities became central to the conversation.

Diaspora refers to groups of individuals who have relocated from their homeland, often facing the challenge of preserving their cultural

identity while adapting to new environments. Homi K. Bhabha discusses diaspora in terms of identity, noting that it creates "a sense of belonging that is both local and transnational, allowing for the emergence of hybrid identities" (*The Location of Culture*). These communities illustrate the delicate balance between maintaining heritage and embracing a host culture, enriching the narrative of multiculturalism.

### **Models of Multiculturalism**

Multiculturalism can be examined through two main perspectives: the "Salad Bowl" and the "Melting Pot." The "Salad Bowl" metaphor emphasizes the importance of maintaining individual cultural identities, allowing immigrants to celebrate their traditions while engaging with a broader society. Each culture retains its uniqueness, similar to the different ingredients in a salad. In contrast, the "Melting Pot" concept encourages assimilation, prompting immigrants to adopt the dominant culture, which can sometimes lead to the loss of their original identities.

In everyday life, multiculturalism addresses the challenges faced by immigrants and ethnic minorities, focusing on their desire for recognition and belonging through unique cultural expressions. When these identities are overlooked, cultural conflicts can arise. A strong multicultural community creates a safe space for immigrants to honor their heritage while acknowledging the contributions of all cultural groups. However, tensions may occur when particular cultural practices conflict with universal human rights, highlighting the intricacies of multiculturalism.

### **Kavita Daswani: A Voice of the Diaspora**

Kavita Daswani is a prominent Indian-American diasporic writer whose works explore the intricacies of identity, cultural conflict, and the immigrant experience. Born in Hong Kong and raised in a vibrant multicultural environment, she began her career as a journalist before moving to fiction. She has written best-selling books such as *For Matrimonial Purposes* (2003), *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills* (2004), *Everything Happens for a Reason* (2005), *Salaam Paris* (2006), *Indie Girl* (2007), *Lovetorn* (2012)

and *Bombay Girl* (2013). Her novel addresses the challenges faced by the younger generation, particularly teenage Indian girls, or newlyweds, as they migrate to foreign land in search of their identity and comfort. Daswani's narratives often tackle themes of women's empowerment, familial roles, arranged marriage and the quest for personal freedom, skillfully exploring diverse cultural belief systems. Her storytelling provides a clear view of the diasporic experience, showing both the struggles and successes of living with multiple identities.

### ***Salaam Paris* as an Indian Diasporic Novel**

*Salaam Paris* can be seen as a diasporic novel since it explores the challenges of identity and belonging in a foreign setting. The main character, Tanaya Shah, is a beautiful young Muslim woman from Mahim, a neighborhood in Mumbai, who has a strong passion for fashion and modeling. Coming from a traditional Muslim family, Tanaya encounters numerous restrictions, judgments, and stereotypes as she ventures into the glamorous fashion world. She progressively realizes her dreams through her beauty, taking risks and confronting challenges. Throughout her modeling career, she travels to various national and international locations, revealing both her external persona and her inner being. Daswani highlights the emotional turmoil Tanaya faces as a result of these geographical transitions, which provide her with fame and a sense of identity while simultaneously creating conflicts with her ethnicity and faith.

### **Tanaya's Journey in *Salaam Paris***

In *Salaam Paris*, Daswani tells the story of Tanaya Shah, a 19-year-old Indian Muslim girl who dreams of becoming a model in Paris. Inspired by Audrey Hepburn's role in *Sabrina*, she yearns for the glamour of the city. When her grandfather proposes an arranged marriage to a man in Paris, she seizes the opportunity, though she avoids meeting her future husband upon arrival. Her life takes an unexpected turn when she rises to fame as a supermodel, distancing herself from her family. Eventually, Tanaya reconnects with her suitor, realizing the importance of their bond as he remains her last link to her family, and longs to reconcile with them by marrying him.

Tanaya's family background deeply influences her journey. Raised by her grandfather after her father abandoned them, she has a strained relationship with her bitter mother. Her orthodox Muslim family enforces strict cultural values, especially regarding marriage and women's roles, teaching her to accept subservience in a male-dominated society. This creates conflict with her personal aspirations, particularly her desire for modeling, which is seen as taboo in her community. As Tanaya explores Western culture and its freedoms, she becomes increasingly aware of the limitations imposed by her traditional upbringing. This tension highlights the broader struggle for freedom and self-expression that many women face in conservative cultures, shaping Tanaya's quest to reconcile her ambitions with her family's expectations.

### **The influence of Multiculturalism**

Tanaya's journey in *Salaam Paris* is a powerful exploration of how multiculturalism influences identity and the sense of belonging. As she moves between different cultures in Paris, New York, Bohemia, and India, she experiences the pull of contrasting values and lifestyles. Her decision to pursue modeling in Paris is a direct result of her exposure to a multicultural environment, where freedom, individuality, and ambition are celebrated. In Paris, Tanaya temporarily distances herself from her traditional Muslim Indian upbringing, embracing a more Westernized sense of self. This shift illustrates the impact of multiculturalism on her identity—how exposure to new cultural norms challenges her previously held beliefs and leads her to redefine herself.

However, as Tanaya moves through different cultural spaces, her sense of belonging fluctuates, and she ultimately returns to her cultural roots when she marries Tariq. This shows how multiculturalism is not just about adopting new practices but also about navigating between different identities and reconciling them. Straddling cultures, Tanaya experiences the intersection of identity, where her traditional Muslim Indian background and the liberal Western ideals of Paris clash and merge. If she had remained in India, her Muslim Indian identity would have likely restricted her

career choices, but in Paris, the diversity of cultures allowed her to explore new possibilities. Tanaya's journey demonstrates how multiculturalism influences identity, shaping the way people interact with various cultures and adapt their sense of self over time. Through her experiences, Kavita Daswani highlights the profound effect that exposure to multiple cultures can have on an individual's identity, showing how multiculturalism is a transformative force that shapes not only personal choices but also one's broader sense of belonging.

Daswani showcases a variety of cultural influences throughout the story. At the outset, she highlights traditional Muslim values through Tanaya's grandfather, who advises her, *"As you step into womanhood, your worth is grounded in the beauty granted to you by Allah. Men of questionable character will start to judge you. It's essential to accept your role as a modest and reserved wife, as well as a devoted mother. Keep this in mind, and you will find happiness."* In contrast, Daswani also depicts the more progressive Western culture of France, where Tanaya's roommates dismiss their families' opinions and wear whatever they desire with confidence. This mindset is common in Paris, where young women generally embrace activities like smoking and often leave their homes upon turning eighteen. Such actions, however, stand in stark contrast to the conservative beliefs held by Muslim girls in India. Similarly, working as waitresses is a typical job for women in Paris, a concept that is significantly less accepted in Tanaya's traditional Indian Muslim community.

### **Cultural Conflict and the Role of Identity**

Daswani skillfully illustrates the clash between traditional Indian culture and Western culture through Tanaya's character. In Paris, she comes into contact with a lifestyle that prioritizes independence and personal expression, particularly among her Western roommates. These principles sharply contrast with the traditional values of her Indian-Muslim upbringing, where women are expected to follow strict behavioral codes, especially regarding marriage and family.

One striking instance of this cultural discord happens when Tanaya declines to drink alcohol, which goes against her Muslim beliefs. Nevertheless, after facing pressure from her roommates, she hesitantly takes a sip, prompting a moment of introspection: *"There are plenty of Muslims who drink," and questions her own identity: "After everything I've done, do I even count as a Muslim anymore? Does Allah still care about me?" With these thoughts swirling in her mind, she reaches for the glass, lifting it to the light before turning to Kai and handing it to him, saying, "You go ahead and enjoy it." (151).*

This inner turmoil illustrates the difficulties of preserving a cultural identity while navigating the demands of a new and often conflicting environment. This moment captures her inner conflict and struggle with her beliefs amidst the pressures of her new environment.

Despite her embrace of the fashion industry, Tanaya prioritizes her cultural values and traditions. She constantly reminds herself that infidelity is a grave sin in the eyes of Allah. Even for the sake of achieving fame and success as a model, she refrains from pursuing relationships with individuals simply because they are actors or rock musicians. The thought of being with anyone before her wedding night is unfathomable to her. In truth, she has preserved her chastity, but in line with the norms of the western fashion world, she agrees to a contract with a rock star to feign a romantic relationship for public appearances. In this scenario, Daswani subtly explores the fusion and hybridization of two distinct cultures. She aims to maintain her virginity, yet to advance her career in the fashion industry, she presents a facade of a relationship with a rock star to the world. Even during an interview, she asserts her Indian-Muslim identity by stating that she avoids pork and alcohol, reflecting her commitment to her cultural and religious values. This dedication underscores her connection to her traditions.

This journey highlights the stark contrasts between Indian and Western cultural norms: while Indian society imposes restrictions on women, the West offers them the freedom to pursue their ambitions.

The novel depicts Tanaya's effort to balance her family's cultural expectations with her wish for autonomy and self-expression. Her bond with her grandfather, in particular, reveals the deep-seated cultural values that influence her self-perception. Despite her achievements in Paris, Tanaya longs for the emotional backing and sense of belonging that her family provides. This desire underscores the emotional hurdles encountered by individuals who must navigate multiple cultural identities and manage the complexities of belonging in an interconnected world.

Through Tanaya, Daswani emphasizes the strong bond that members of the Indian diaspora maintain with their homeland. Participating in photo shoots on European beaches, Tanaya reminisces about collecting seashells at Juhu Beach with her grandfather, anchoring her to her past. Tanaya reflects on the times she shared with her family. *"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). While Tanaya achieves success in the fashion industry, she confronts loneliness and realizes that true happiness lies in her roots.

Upon returning to India, Tanaya experiences a profound sense of loss, particularly missing her grandfather. She recognizes that her success in modeling would not have been possible without her grandfather's support. The freedom she enjoys is attributed to her grandfather's progressive views. With the loss of her grandfather, she feels a sense of detachment from her ancestral home and land. Rejected by her mother, she is compelled to leave India once again. However, her family remains alive in her memories—an ever-recurring past. Her choice to marry Tariq seems to reflect a deep-seated need to regain acceptance within her family.

### **Conclusion**

Kavita Daswani's *Salaam Paris* offers a rich exploration of the complexities of identity and multiculturalism in the context of the Indian diaspora. Through Tanaya's journey, Daswani illustrates the emotional and psychological challenges of straddling multiple cultures and negotiating one's sense of self in a multicultural world. The novel highlights the importance of

embracing one's cultural heritage while also taking advantage of the opportunities that arise from engaging with various cultural perspectives. Ultimately, *Salaam Paris* serves as a poignant reminder that navigating multiple identities is not only a personal experience but also reflects broader societal trends in multiculturalism. Tanaya's story sheds light on the struggles and triumphs encountered by individuals in the diaspora, offering readers a deeper understanding of the complexities of cultural identity and the search for belonging in an increasingly interconnected world.

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