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***The Mistress of Spices and Salaam, Paris:* Re-Reading The Juxtaposition of Human Values**

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ABSTRACT

Other than adding to the readability and popularity of Indian writings in English on the international arena, what the female Indian writers of the diaspora have identifiably achieved is an incontrovertible, feministic reinterpretation of terms – mostly patriarchal ones – like ‘moral truth’, ‘human values’, and ‘righteousness’. With the female Indian diasporic writers advocating sexual openness, plurality of partners, pre-marital sexual union, and staunch opposition to patriarchal codes of dressing and conduct for women, especially the young ones, in their writings as a form of feminist protestation, terms like ‘moral truth’ and ‘human values’ do not seem to have the same connotations as they had in the earlier times. What this paper proposes to do is to very briefly re-examine the two novels – Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) and Kavita Daswani’s *Salaam, Paris* (2007) – in order to interpret how terms like ‘human values’, ‘moral truths’, and so on, have been changed in the writings of the female Indian diasporic writings. Daswani’s professorship and Daswani’s journalistic engagements with American media might not permit the tagging of the term ‘ordinary women’ to them; but their voices appear to reflect what the liberalised female Indians of the metros or those settled in the West think of the patriarchal social values in the 21st century.

Keywords: Daswani, Divakaruni, human values, intrinsic, extrinsic, feminism

If the late 20th and early 21st century-literary world is being ruled by writers from South Asia (Brians 3-5), it would be also not an exaggeration to mention, following Vijay Mishra’s observations

(2-7), that the writers of the Indian diaspora, especially the female authors, are among the more appreciated ones by the readers. In addition, Sam Naidu writes that “[t]he most prolific diasporic locations, in terms of [...] literary activity [...] are the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and Canada” (Raghuram *et al.* 368), and female Indian diasporic writers settled in the United States of America, including Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (b. 1956), Jhumpa Lahiri (b. 1967), Kiran Desai (b. 1971), and Kavita Daswani (b. 1971), are identifiably being preferred by international readership to those settled in other countries¹.

Other than adding to the readability and popularity of Indian writings in English on the international arena, what the female Indian writers of the diaspora have identifiably achieved is an incontrovertible, feministic reinterpretation of terms – mostly patriarchal ones – like ‘moral truth’, ‘human values’, and ‘righteousness’. As Sam Harris opines, ‘moral truth’ and ‘human values’ are two of the most important issues of a righteous human life (2). However, with the female Indian diasporic writers advocating sexual openness, plurality of partners, pre-marital sexual union, and staunch opposition to patriarchal codes of dressing and conduct for women, especially the young ones, in their writings as a form of feminist protestation, terms like ‘moral truth’ and ‘human values’ do not seem to have the same connotations as they had in the earlier times. What this paper proposes to do is to very briefly re-examine the two novels – Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) and Kavita Daswani’s *Salaam, Paris* (2007) – in order to interpret how terms like ‘human values’, ‘moral truths’, and so on, have been changed in the writings of the female Indian diasporic writings. Daswani’s professorship at the University of Houston, Texas, and Daswani’s journalistic engagements with American media (including the *C.N.N.*, *C.N.B.C. Asia*, and *Women’s Wear Daily*) might not permit the tagging of the term ‘ordinary women’ to them; but their voices appear to reflect what the liberalised

female Indians of the metros or those settled in the West think of the patriarchal social values in the 21st century.

The interpretation begins with a reference to Michael Zimmerman's division of the term 'human values' into two forms: 'extrinsic human values' and 'intrinsic human values'². While 'extrinsic human values' concern themselves with external behaviour and intra-societal interactions, 'intrinsic human values' are crucial for moral judgements, and help individuals to consider whether what they are doing are correct or acceptable to themselves according to their own perspectives. The writer of this paper considers that if the term 'human values' includes 'openness' and 'affection', it should also include 'self-respect' and 'guiltless self-introspection'. These two 'intrinsic values' become quite instrumental in shaping up the individuals' ideas about 'extrinsic human values'. A self-respecting person, for example, does not allow society to make her/him think that s/he is doing something 'incorrect', and hence has no fear for feigning certain social behaviours. I think that this aspect is most exhaustively reflected in Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*. Divakaruni's novel was made into a film in 2005 by the U.S. screenwriter and director Paul M. Berges (b. 1968), and starred Aishwarya Rai (b. 1973) as 'Tilo' or 'Tilottoma', the central character and a (clairvoyant) Indian immigrant to San Francisco, and Dylan McDermott (b. 1961) as 'Doug', Tilo's love-interest. In Divakaruni's novel, 'Doug' is actually 'Raven', an attractive Native American, with whom Tilo falls in love and has sex, which 'angers' her magical spices.

Even before the symbolic struggle between the 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' human values begin in Tilottoma's clairvoyant-mind, one must remember that by introducing Tilottoma, a clairvoyant in charge of 'magical' spices which 'heal people', herself to the West, Divakaruni is demonstrating – against the Orientalist interpretations – what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak defines as 'strategic essentialism' (Ritzer and Ryan 1993). That the

Westerners associate magic and exoticness to the East, including India, is admitted by Divakaruni, and she uses these erroneous Western ideas to give a well-chiselled identity to Tilottoma. The very opening lines of the novel reflect this:

“I am a Mistress of Spices. I can work the others too. Mineral, metal, earth and sand and stone. The gems with their cold clear light. The liquids that burn their hues into your eyes till you see nothing else. I learned them all on the island. But the spices are my love. I know their origins, and what their colours signify, and their smells. I can call each by the true-name it was given at the first, when earth split like skin and offered it up to the sky. Their heat runs in my blood. From *amchur* to *zafran*, they bow to my command. At a whisper they yield up to me their hidden properties, their magic powers. Yes, they all hold magic, even the everyday American spices you toss unthinking into your cooking pot. You doubt? Ah. You have forgotten the old secrets your mother’s mothers knew. Here is one of them again: Vanilla beans soaked soft in goat’s milk and rubbed on the wrist-bone can guard against the evil eye. And here another: A measure of pepper at the foot of the bed, shaped into a crescent, cures you of nightmare. But the spices of true power are from my birthland, land of ardent poetry, aquamarine feathers. Sunset skies brilliant as blood. They are the ones I work with. If you stand in the centre of this room and turn slowly around, you will be looking at every Indian spice that ever was – even the lost ones – gathered here upon the shelves of my store. I think I do not exaggerate when I say there is no other place in the world quite like this” (Divakaruni 3).

Tilo has been forbidden by the First Mother not to leave her store of spices (in the U.S.A.); she must not also touch the skin of the Americans who come to her for treatment. Such warnings seem to make up the ‘extrinsic human values’ for the clairvoyant-girl. However, like Tennyson’s Lady of Shallot’s, Tilo’s intrinsic values soon begin to rebel. When she meets Raven, she gradually falls in love with him – much to the chagrin of her ‘spices’ (which might be identified as representatives of the watchful, patriarchal society) – which begin to cause trouble to her customers and the U.S.-based acquaintances. When the First Mother scolds Tilo for ‘interacting’ with Raven, her ‘intrinsic’ and ‘extrinsic’ values once again get

separated because, extrinsically, Tilo wants to return to India (as per the wish of the First Mother) but, intrinsically, she wants to prolong her association with Raven and the United States of America. That is why, she once again re-joins her intrinsic and extrinsic values to inform her 'spices' that she would submit to their wishes of abstinence but only after having a session of lovemaking with Raven. This angers the spices, which results in the spices' store being destroyed by an earthquake. However, due to Tilo's intrinsic honesty, she survives, and at the end of the novel, she and Raven reconcile and rebuild her store. Christiana Bacchilega writes that in *The Mistress of Spices*, the novelist deftly balances the extrinsic Oriental values to intrinsic values of commitment and love (Hasse 188), which is universal. Gita Rajan, in addition, feels that Divakaruni's employment of 'magic' leads to the creation of a 'fluid' place within the novel, which permits the main character (Tilottoma) to 'modify reality', thus adjusting her intrinsic and extrinsic values:

"[Divakaruni] operates by drawing upon internal powers to gesture towards a deliberate mysticism, albeit a personalised, orientalised mysticism. Magic itself suggests an exteriority, and according to *Webster's Dictionary* is the 'practice of attempting to produce supernatural effects or control events through the usage of charms, spells, or rituals'. Magic is based upon a causal relationship between a fantastic, ritualistic act, and the desired outcome, and since it is not bound as rigidly by superstition as religious belief, it creates a fluid space for the protagonist to function in and modify reality" (216).

Interestingly, Ali Salami and Farnoosh Pirayesh connect the struggle between the intrinsic and extrinsic human values of the central character of *The Mistress of Spices* to her confusion while setting in a new, western nation:

"The Indian women who live abroad are torn between two opposing values: old and new ones, and it is what Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in this novel concentrates on. She depicts women who find themselves in 'an in-between state' who struggle to forge identities for themselves. Her heroine, Tilo, is the typical immigrant who represents the type of struggles that the majority of immigrants undergo, that is, their

attempt to balance both their 'heritage and life' in the new host country. After settling in the United States of America in a small shop, Tilo is in an 'interstitial space'; so, on the one hand, she cannot forget her past while, on the other, she tends to go forward in life. She lives 'in-between' because the island is no more her home, and the United States of America is yet unfamiliar to be her home" (12).

The Mistress of Spices is – identifiably – an objective piece of writing. On the other hand, Daswani's *Salaam, Paris* – considered by Marian Aguiar as one of the important publications of the group of Indian diasporic novels – is, like *The Village Bride of Beverly Hills* (2004), partially based on the novelist's own experiences with marriage³. Daswani was almost forced by her relatives to marry a Nashik-based, unsavoury businessman. Later, she also rejected proposals from men who expected her to only cook⁴. By writing a novel on what kind of husband an educated and independence-loving woman should choose both in the West and in the East, and by discussing the various ideas and aspects of an 'independent life' for females, Daswani identifiably tries to bring in the issue of human values and to balance 'intrinsic human values' and 'extrinsic human values'.

Usually, female Indian diasporic writings speak for the economic, social, moral and sexual 'values' and independence for women, and I shall limit my interpretations of 'values' to interpreting the various ideas of morality and self-respect as they occur to Tanaya Shah and Shazia Husain in *Salaam, Paris*. Kamayani Sharma has already lambasted novels like *Salaam, Paris* for their depiction of 'faux feminism'⁵ because of the ultimate failures of the females in these texts to come out of the shackles of patriarchy. Marian Aguiar has a different perspective on this regarding the issue of 'arranged marriage', something which Tanaya Shah's grandfather 'Nana' tries to 'impose' upon her. She writes that the existence of 'arranged marriages' and joint living systems have become very important in the U.S.A., the U.K., and Canada in the 21st century because of the 'cultural contacts' such marriages create among diverse groups, and help

busy people find time to attend offices and creativities without worrying about their children (7).

The clash between 'intrinsic human values' and 'extrinsic human values' for Tanaya Shah, the teenage-protagonist of Daswani's *Salaam, Paris* starts from the very 'Prologue' to the novel itself. Even as she readies herself to walk on ramp at a Parisian nightclub in minimum clothes, Shah recalls that she is 'a Muslim girl [...] accustomed to a black veiled burka' (Daswani 1), which are manifestations of her 'extrinsic values', but as she wears a pink-coloured leather hot-pants, she feels 'th[at] is [...] [her] moment' (*ibid.* 2), which suggests that her intrinsic values are urging her to continue with her show, and despite being 'too stunned to move' (*ibid.* 1), she feels that she should do the show. As the novel progresses, from Chapters One to Thirty-four, the apparent clashes and balancing of Tanaya Shah's extrinsic and intrinsic values are brought forth to readers at various junctures.

In Chapter One of *Salaam, Paris*, for example, Tanaya Shah's extrinsic human values leads her to accept, for a time being, her grandfather's assessment of her as a young and 'obedient' girl, but her intrinsic values lead her to internally resent that she is meant to be 'a pretty quiet wife and a devoted mother', and she points out to readers the moment during her seventeenth birthday 'when [...] [a young and beautiful girl] realises that she is more than just the sum of the expectations of her' (*ibid.* 5). That is why, she internally supports Nilu, her friend, when the latter assesses that Shah has got qualities in her to become an attractive model like one she sees in *Teen Cosmo* (*ibid.* 6).

As Shah grows up, she rents a video-cassette of the 1954-American romantic comedy *Sabrina*, starred in by Audrey Hepburn (1929-93) and Humphrey Bogart (1899-1957), which is based on the U.S. playwright Samuel Taylor's *Sabrina Fair: A Woman of the World* (1953), and which deals with how Sabrina Fairchild (played by Hepburn), the daughter of the Larrabee-family-chauffeur, is enticed by the womanising David Larrabee

(enacted by William Holden, 1918-81), but is saved from making a bad decision, unconsciously, by David's workaholic older brother Linus (played by Bogart), and they sail together to Paris. To Shah, the film befits both her extrinsic and intrinsic values. While listening to Fairchild, she feels, externally, that as a woman she is entitled to her own choice; internally, she appreciates Fairchild's desires and love, and resolves to 'one day [to] go to Paris too' (*ibid.* 10).

In Chapter Two, Shah's extrinsic values leads to partially agree to her grandfather's proposal to get married, but her intrinsic values leads her to respect herself, and she decides not to marry a stranger (Tariq Khan) or become an immigrant to a new country (France) unless she knows both of them (Khan and France) well (*ibid.* 13). Shah's internal resolve manifests in her external protestations, which leads her grandfather (Nana) to find means to send her alone to Paris to lodge with his relative Mina Husain. With her migration to Paris from Mahim, near Mumbai, Shah's internal and external values come to be deeply influenced with the temporary arrival (to Paris) of Shazia Husain, Mina Husain's 'wild and single' Los Angeles-based girl (*ibid.* 21-22). Tanaya Shah likes Shazia Husain 'immediately', and though her extrinsic values urge her to contact home and Tariq Khan after her migration to Paris, she feels outwardly 'guilty', and yet moves around Paris with Husain identifiably without much inner turmoil (*ibid.* 23-25). In Shazia Husain, who works as a legal secretary in Los Angeles, both the extrinsic and intrinsic human values match with each other perfectly. She does not care about society, and does exactly what she feels is right and enjoyable. Her influence on Shah alters her too, and she symbolically (and initially) 'rejects' Tariq Khan in Chapter Four. In the same chapter, though Shah externally wants to return to India, internally she wants to stay back in Paris. Finally, Tananya joins both her extrinsic and intrinsic human values, ignoring threats and protestations from her grandfather and mother, and decides to live in Paris temporarily for some time more (*ibid.* 35-

36): an idea which the external exhortations and internal reasoning's of Shazia Husain helps her to have.

The external and internal values that Shazia Husain have do not prevent her from taking Shah away to a Parisian working-women's residence, where she leaves Shah to become 'independent' in Chapter Five. Though Tanaya Shah, at least, externally feels that she does not 'belong' to anyone in her new residence, she internally steels herself against going back to Mahim (*ibid.* 40). Husain's values does not make her feel guilty at all for leaving Tanaya Shah in a new place, and she does not call her often (Chapter Six). Shah, moreover, discovers both internally and externally, how Muslims are erroneously often regarded as 'terrorists' in the West, and clarifies the mistakes to her flat-mate Zoe, from whom she maintains an external distance but admires internally for her marrying out of love and leaving it (*ibid.* 42-43). Later, in Chapter Seven, though Shah's extrinsic human values still urge her to return to India and be indignant at Husain's earlier suggestions, internally she appreciates her enough to permit her to suggest going to Mathias, the owner of *Café Crème*, Paris, for a job (*ibid.* 50). Husain pays for the first month of Shah's lodging at her new flat, which shows how Husain internally and externally feels favourably for her 'distant cousin' (*ibid.* 53).

Tanaya Shah's real clash with her conceptions of extrinsic human values and intrinsic human values begins from Chapter Nine onwards. Externally, she resents at wearing net-dresses like a 'French maid'; and yet she, even during her temporary concealment behind a table, indirectly appreciates when Mathias admires her curvaceous body (*ibid.* 55). Later, working with the designer Bruno, Shah stands in for an injured girl during a catwalk, and, in Chapter Ten, she is already struggling externally between her choices of the traditional 'dupatta' and hot pants, and internally enjoying her own financial independence (*ibid.* 61-62). Shah's extrinsic values are jolted as her grandfather packs

her belongings of Mahim off to Paris, apparently forever, and in Chapter Twelve, she feels fewer amounts of moral compunctions to visit Dimitri Marounis, a Greek casting-agent, for modelling assignments. Externally she feels like an 'imposter' during one of her modelling-assignment-seeking tours (Chapter Thirteen) (*ibid.* 82), but internally, she does not have any objection to wearing short dresses for photography, and yet, once again, her self-respect and self-confidence in Chapter Fourteen, help her to reject the sexual advances of the British photographer Robert (*ibid.* 90-91).

By the time Tanaya Shah leaves France for the United States of America to work with Stavros Marounis (Chapter Sixteen), she has already, and temporarily, reconciled her ideas of extrinsic and intrinsic values, and enjoys doing what she feels are beneficial for her career. She no longer minds people openly admiring her curvaceous body, and is ready to be kissed by Stravos Marounis even when he is married (*ibid.* 119). In Chapters Twenty and Twenty One, Shah, knowing fully what she is doing, easily enacts being in a sexual relationship with a fashionable and gay musician Kai for the tabloid-gossips, even when they live separately under a single roof. Shazia Husain, once again, appreciates this (*ibid.* 133-34). In Chapter Twenty-five, where Shah re-encounters Tariq Khan as a film-crew-man, her values lead her to opt for acting in a film, which, in the next chapter, ends in a disaster. By this time, Tanaya Shah's extrinsic and intrinsic values do not find it wrong to fall in love with Tariq Khan for his sensitivity and sincerities, and she joins him in Chapter Twenty-six (*ibid.* 164-65). During her important twenty-sixth-chapter conversation with Tariq Khan regarding the various restrictions imposed upon women but not on men (*ibid.* 166-67), Tanaya Shah's external and internal values join to strengthen her points of arguments and grievances, and by the end of the chapter, she *makes* Tariq Khan fall in love with her. Between Chapters Twenty-nine and Thirty, she returns to India by her own choice, and by Chapter Thirty-one, she has decided

to marry Tariq Khan, this time both her external and internal values are urging her to do it because she has *chosen* to marry him. As she kisses Tariq Khan without any moral compunction, Tanaya Shah feels that “[t]here were certain things [...] I should have listened to my Nana about” (*ibid.* 200). As the novel ends, the same Tanaya Shah, who used to hide her curvaceous body under loose overalls, is dressed in a tight-fitting ‘cashmere sweater’ (*ibid.* 208), flying to the United States of America with her fiancé Tariq Khan, whom her ideas of extrinsic and intrinsic values have overwhelmingly approved.

In conclusion, it transpires that the intrinsic and extrinsic human values seem to have been alternatively separated and juxtaposed in fiction produced by the Indian female writers of the diaspora, especially in Divakaruni and Daswani. This advances the ideas of female liberation. Yasmin Hussain seems to be of the idea that such novels should ideally combine Western values of individuality and independence with the Eastern values of the awareness of patriarchy and desire to move from traditionalism to modernity (100). Joel Kuortti, in addition, argues that novels by the female Indian writers of the diaspora catch females journeying between the U.S.A. or the U.K. and India, which, together, help them realise the basics of human values by referring to such values in Western and Eastern societies (79-80). This happens for both Tilottoma (symbolically) and Tanaya Shah (physically) – they discover the nuances of human values, and of intrinsic and extrinsic human values as they journey – mentally or physically – between the West and the East.

NOTES

1. Kamath, A.P. “Women Writers of Indian Diaspora create a big Impact”. *Rediff on the Net* 23 August 1999. Accessed on 17 September 2019 <<https://www.rediff.com/news/1999/aug/23us1.htm>>
2. Zimmerman, Michael. “Intrinsic versus Extrinsic Values”. *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. 9 January 2019. Accessed on 15 September 2019 <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/value-intrinsic-extrinsic/>>

3. Paris, Arthur J. "Few Men did not like me because I was dark". *Rediff News*. 10 August 2004. Accessed on 15 September 2019 <<https://www.rediff.com/news/2004/aug/10inter1.htm>>
4. *Ibid.*
5. Sharma, Kamayani. "This is not that Dawn". *The Caravan* 1 October 2017. Accessed on 15 March 2019 <<https://caravanmagazine.in/perspectives/faux-feminism-bollywood-new-romantic-comedy>>

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