



Struggle Of Female Characters To Be ‘Real Women’ In Kundanika Kapadia’s *Seven Steps In The Sky*: A Feminist Study

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Abstract

Seven Steps in the Sky is an English translation of Gujarati novel *Saat Pagla Aakashma* by Kundanika Kapadia. The relationship between men and women, instead of being rosebush grown in the grounds of equality and liberation, has been a thorny flower sprung from the poor foundation of relationship between the exploiter and the exploited. The writer considers marriage as a first step in divinity, but she also portrays how a married woman steps into land of restrictions. Though they are strong and respected in their house, they are considered less than their husbands in social prestige, customs and traditions because of basic perception of ownership of men. Before the history started, men decided how and for whom women should live. This habit has come down in their blood and became one with their soul. Women are ignorant about the world around them and have perverted ideas of reality which make them think that their problems are their fate, or God's will. The novel shows that when women dive deep into the sea of love, it contains no pearls. They are scared to enjoy freedom and are rarely prepared to fight for it. They are dehumanized being exploited and men do not treat them as complete and absolute human beings. The paper examines how the female characters of the novel, *Seven Steps in the Sky*, at the same time, are not subordinate and they rise and shine above all the difficulties they face throughout their lives. This study concentrates on how these female characters, by challenging patriarchal norms with their courage, go beyond the seventh step and reclaim the sky of independence.

Keywords: Kundanika Kapadia, *Seven Steps in the Sky*, translation, feminism, real women

Introduction

Feminism is a social, political, cultural as well as transnational movement that advocates for the equality, identity, rights, freedom, opportunities, questions and empowerment of women. It uses sociocultural context of gender discrimination, arising from social conditioning and the cultural mindset, which is predominantly male, as the basis for the study of literature. It emphasises on the culture and existence of their own. Feminists challenge the rigid patriarchal systems, societal norms and structures that perpetuate gender-based discrimination and inequality. Feminism promotes the world where women have equal opportunities, choices, rights and power. As the feminist movement gained steam in the mid-20th century, literary critics

began looking to gender studies for new models of literary criticism. It is rightfully said that there is no force more powerful than a woman determined to rise. Simone de Beauvoir, one of the leading feminists, in her 1949 work *The Second Sex* quotes, “A woman is not born, but becomes.” This explains gender not as a biological aspect but as a social construct that is not defined by the birth. Apart from this, Toril Moi in her book “What is a Woman?: And Other Essays” discusses the concepts of feminist, female and feminine as a political position, a matter of biology and a set of culturally defined characteristics respectively.

Seven Steps in the Sky is not the story of an individual, but it is the story of whole womankind. Though this book depicts the Gujarati community of India by presenting a Mehta Family and other minor families as well, it represents the sufferings and indignity of women in all the cultures. It narrates the story of entire womanhood all over the world that has faced many troubles and suffered at the hands of male-dominated society, its weird customs and its culture. It narrates suffering and humiliation that a woman undergoes in a patriarchal society. It shows that although women are strong and respected in their house, they are considered less than their husbands in social prestige, customs and traditions because of men’s basic perception of ownership. Women were always forced to do their duty to the relations of their husbands but their own relations did not matter. Before the history started, men decided how and for whom women should live. This habit has come down in their blood and became one with their soul. Women are ignorant about the world around them and have perverted ideas of reality which make them think that their problems are their fate, or God’s will. It is only a woman who is to make all the sacrifices, has to let go, has to put up with or to give in to a situation of confrontation (Kapadia 245). In the title itself, ‘Seven Steps’ is the symbol of marriage ceremony (*saptpadi*) in Hindu society and ‘Sky’ is the symbol of freedom and space (Preface) as the ultimate symbol of independence is the limitless sky (256).

In her novel, Kapadia quotes a term “real woman” through one of her characters, Ana. When Ana was talking to her friends recalling her painful flashback, she said, “Then one day I thought, I don’t want to live like this. I don’t want to die fulfilling others’ expectations. I want to live a life that satisfies me. I want to live true to myself, to my thoughts and feelings. I don’t want to be an ideal wife; I want to be a real woman” (3). This paper examines how the female figures of Kapadia’s *Seven Steps in the Sky* struggle throughout their lives to find their existence and finally succeed to be “real women” by attaining individuality.

Ana: A Courageous Woman with the Revolutionary Thoughts

Ana is one of the major female characters who is portrayed with all her strengths, spirit and skills and it proves that she is not inferior to any man even a bit. Even after the sudden death of her husband, Vipul, she successfully took over all the things and made a better living for herself, her mother-in-law, Jaya and her children, Abha and Agnivesh. She is the one who in spite of breaking down after being a widow, gathers courage and gives a tough fight to all the troublesome outer conflicts and hard circumstances.

Ana had a special interest in literature and in fact she had written some poems which were published and critically admired as well. Her poems had a mood of insurrection and revolution that perfectly reflected her personality. Since the very young age, she witnessed many incidents where women were considered as the inferiors or were blamed for one or the other thing because of the ignorance of the people. She was so firm that she never hesitated to put her own views in front of others and to raise her voice against the injustice. She believed that it can happen only in India where the rights of men have priority and where the right to desert is always the right of man as words like 'barren man' or 'deserted husband' never appear in the dictionary (Haresh). She thought that if there are no children because of a defect in the man, he is never subjected to any taunts from other people (129). She even opposed her mother who cleverly sent Ana's aunt away from the wedding ceremony as she was a widow and she thought that she will bring bad luck or the ill omen and her uncle, who was a widower was allowed to stay there during the ceremony. Ana firmly believed that if a woman wants to live the way she wants to, she will have to tear the fabric of the society (1). One day she had resolved upon two things: "I will marry only a man who will live with me on an equal basis, and I will not tolerate something which I think is wrong and unjust" (132). She promised herself to fight against something unfair whether it be in her life or in the lives of people close to her.

Ana got married to Vipul. Vipul originally belonged to the Gujarati family but resided in London and when he was on his Nairobi tour, he came across some of the poems of Ana. It was so thrilling for him that a Gujarati woman wrote of such things and then he arranged a meeting with Ana on his next trip to India. When Ana expressed that nobody much like her thoughts, he stated, "But I am in love precisely with those thoughts and also with the one who thinks those thoughts" (132). In their very first meeting, Vipul impressed Ana with his thoughts about women that every woman should be economically independent as it helps woman's life to grow and blossom more. Ana was so influenced by him as she never heard such words from any man. She felt that from a far country a comrade had come to motivate her in her thinking, otherwise she had been all alone in her thoughts and aspirations as well. Finally both of them tied a knot and went to London where the Gujarati community welcomed them warmly. Both of them got a job in the insurance company. At first, both of them managed to do household works together but with the passage of time, the help of Vipul became less and now it has become the responsibility of Ana. She firmly believed the idea that housework is for women only is an anachronism when both the partners are working (133). But after some years of their marriage, Ana felt that though Vipul was proud about her poems and got attracted to her after reading them only, he was not happy if she keeps herself busy in writing them when he is at home. Soon he started replying her in a sarcastic manner if she ever requested him to complete some minor household work or to wait until she completes her writing. Ana started thinking about this conditional relationship, what if Vipul could love and live in peace with her only if she was a lesser person than he (138). Suddenly Vipul started behaving in such a contrast manner than he appeared in their first meeting. He took no interest in discussing their problems peacefully and when children took the side of their mother, he became so furious. Things got worse day by day and everything was falling apart between them.

One day Vipul went for the dinner with his friends, then came home late and was watching a television news. Suddenly he fell down in agony and before Ana could ask a doctor to visit and check him, he got a massive heart attack and died. His accidental death came like an unexpected tempest and Ana suffered with the terror of ruined future of the family. She thought overnight that if Vipul had not been so hyper and exasperated in everything, this might not have occurred with him. But very soon she gathered a little courage and thought that everything should be started again and plans must be made. Though one life had vanished, others must go on (141). After a week off, she joined her work and resumed her career as a writer. Thus, Ana's boldness is visible in the action that even after the death of her husband. She never made any changes in her usual dressing as well she considered it so superficial to express a grief through the mode or fashion of dress. Though she hesitated at first, she applied the red dot to her forehead. Just like other women, she was aware about her looks and she strongly believed that it had nothing to do with her feeling of grief about her husband Vipul's demise. Her mother-in-law was so shocked to see her in a colourful dress with a red dot on her forehead but then Ana convinced her that the people of the society or the ancient traditions should not indicate who should do what but it should be the choice of the individuals according to their understanding and capability (144). She succeeded in persuading her that it is not as if a woman can apply a bindi only if she has a husband as she herself used to wear it even before her marriage (146).

Apart from this, she, with all her talents, provided her children a better living and a high education that helped them a lot for their growth and advancement. Since their birth, Ana never discriminated between her children Abha and Agnivesh and she provided them the same duties to perform and same routine works to complete. She never believed the age-long belief that there should be specific jobs for boys and girls. Sometimes Abha used to play with the sports car and Agnivesh used to sew buttons on Abha's frock. This often surprised Jaya and Vipul and they even opposed to it but Abha still continued this tradition of equal division of work between both her children. Abha married to a noble man named Gaganendra and then after some time, all of them returned to India and stated a new and happy beginning of their lives by residing with their other friends in the famous 'Anandgram'.

Sumitra: A Motivational Idol for Youth

Sumitra was a pretty college girl who had just completed her Bachelor's degree and now wanted to pursue the Master's degree. Because of her practical thoughts and deeds from the very young age, she eventually becomes such a great inspiration for the youth. Like this, she is presented as a girl of rebellious nature who also possesses proper understanding and maturity.

Sumitra met Vasudha at the garden and while talking she expressed her views on women and marriage. She said that as she had completed her graduation, now her parents wanted her to get married soon so that they can make further arrangements for her younger sisters' marriages. She firmly stated, "It seems that girls study just to catch a husband. As soon as they get one, they stop" (42). She was annoyed with a 'God-given

rule' of to study and to get married. She said that when a woman marries, she leaves everything behind and she has to live two lives. She herself was ready to marry only when she would get someone who would allow her to be herself and would accept her the way she is. One night she left her home because a man chosen by her family raised a question of a dowry which she had always opposed. She said, "The marriage in which a dowry is taken is not a marriage but a commercial deal" (117). She took a shelter at Vasudha's house for a day or two and then she returned to her house with the aim to light a torch of freedom that she did not let to be dissolved in the thin air and few years since then, she married a man she found to be her perfect match.

Though Sumitra was courageous and of a daring nature, she also had a weak point like other strong people and that was to be loved and to be secure. She said, "Without love, women's hearts remain empty, their lives dissatisfied, but once they receive it they blossom to their full extent" (118). One day, Sumitra met Animesh who went to buy tickets to Delhi in a travel agency where Sumitra was working. They got attracted, became friends and then one by one they crossed the thresholds of closeness (119). Later Sumitra came to know that Animesh was already married and had a daughter as well but then somehow Animesh assured her that he would apply for a divorce and they will be able to stay together forever. Sumitra trusted him blindly but then she came to know that Animesh again betrayed her when she read a telegram from his wife in which she mentioned about the birth of a son! After knowing this, Sumitra slapped him so violently and she also wanted to smash his head against the wall, again and again. She was angry on herself as she had a deep faith on him but it was too late now. In Divakaruni's novel, *The Palace of Illusions*, Shikhandi says, "Wait for a man to respect your honour and you'll wait forever" (Divakaruni 49) and that was what happened with Sumitra.

But after being seriously wounded and cruelly shocked by the behavior of her husband Animesh, she dropped the 'Su' from her name as a gesture of making a break with past (172) and started considering herself as 'Mitra.' Though she tried to keep herself busy, her painful experience kept reminding her about her love for a totally counterfeit man. But now she was tired of it and wanted to have a progress in her life. When the people of "Anandgram" arranged a protest march against the rape criminals, she, along with other members, led this non-violent procession. During this march, Mitra addressed the meeting with her sharp and edged words and also gave all the necessary details of the march. Though all of them were protesting so peacefully, there was a charge by the police squad in which she got a hard stroke on her head and it started bleeding so profusely. She was taken to the hospital immediately but she died at the midnight. Thus, Mitra became a martyr in the women's struggle for equality, respect, justice and love (254) and sacrificed her valuable life for the betterment of the society.

Vasudha: A Woman who Firmly Stood Up for her Rights

In this novel, Vasudha Mehta, who is playing a lead role, represents the women deteriorated to a subordinate status and who herself has no identity of her own in her family. She is depicted as a firm woman who also personifies the aspirations of all women who want space and who want to be one's own self. She refuses to simply remain a woman cast longing for love and respect and to be in the image that the men of the society want of them that is to be obedient, dependent, and compliant, obeying to the traditional customs and such a restricted role of a mother and a housewife.

Vasudha, before her marriage, belonged to a lower-middle class family and was the third of five daughters. Her wedding to Vyomesh was merely a responsibility her parents were completing so that her younger sisters also get a suitable match as early as possible. There had been a great relief for them when the marriage was finally arranged because there were only two daughters to worry about from then. Vasudha had a great urge to have the right to refuse for it but it could not work out. It was the day before her marriage when all the preparations were in the full swing but Vasudha's mind was full of mixed feelings - hope, excitement, apprehension, sadness and so on (7). She had such a different kind of fascination for the beautiful sky and the clouds that reflect the golden and orange rays of the setting sun. She often used to get spellbound after watching this enchanting interplay of the colours. When a day before marriage she went to collect papadams from the terrace, she lost in these colours again. Then she suddenly saw a large bird emerging from the darkness and also a streak of light on the horizon. She felt that the sky wanted to give her some message and something of it had entered her soul (9). She could finally interpret what it wanted to indicate that after her wedding the next day, she would be caged in so many duties and responsibilities but life should always be like the flight of a bird in the sky that is so weightless, without any pressure, in rhythm with everything, singing and voyaging to the heights (8). This seed had been planted in her young mind and at that time, on the night before her wedding, she promises herself,

“Someday, I shall live like that bird. I may get married, set up a home, have a family, but one day I will live in tune with my wishes. I'll say yes if I want to or no if I so desire. I'll not live under any pressure. I will compose my own song and will sing it too” (9).

Finally at a very young age of eighteen, Vasudha gets married to Vyomesh and becomes a daughter-in-law of the well-known and well-settled Mehta family. All the days, months and years that she had lived at her father's home were folded away like a long scroll and though it was full of memories, there were rarely any happy memories. There was some laughter at times, but all the rest was filled with the grey lines of works and daily tasks (10). After her wedding, the life of Vasudha did not remain the same. Day by day, she had tramped in the dull dark caves of work and she could rarely get a chance to go out on the balcony and breathe the fresh air, just as she used to do before her marriage. There have been drastic changes that came into her

routine schedule and any of her preferences had no value. She could never act according to how she actually felt like and had always been taken into account what others would say and feel about her and her behaviour. This was the reason that she was forced to disregard her own thoughts and expressions to something. Among all these daily dealings and work in this new house of her, often what she had wished and what she had actually done were two totally different things (6).

When Vasudha went to see their new constructed flat, there she was introduced with Faiba for the first time. Vyomesh lost his parents when he was very young so Faiba, his father's sister, took the place of his mother and supported him throughout his life to reach at the stage that he was standing at now. Vasudha respected her a lot as she was at the place of mother-in-law for her but later when she came to know about Faiba's mindset and experienced her weird behaviour, there were so many conflicts aroused in her mind. She always used to give orders to Vasudha to finish one or the other household work. She used to decide the method of the task and when this task was to be done. Vasudha used to let go everything by remembering Faiba's sorrowful past. She was widowed since childhood and passed her days darkened with pain and nights soaked with tears. Vasudha often used to think, "Now it is Faiba's turn to rule; let her rule; she won't be so hard if I don't resist" (12). Even after Vasudha's gentle care, Faiba's harshness did not reduce a bit and she had an opposition with every single thought or hobby of Vasudha and she tried to control them. Vasudha liked to read in a spare moment but Faiba even considered it as a 'bad habit'. When Vasudha was pregnant, Faiba said confidently by seeing her body shape that it would be a boy. Vasudha always got surprised and said, "Faiba doesn't know what is in my heart but she knows what is in my womb" (29). Though Vasudha looked after her all through her life, Faiba's death did not affect her personally and she did not feel any sorrow. She felt like Faiba never loved or respected her feelings and willingly or unwillingly she had to do what she told her. There had always been a disturbing relationship between them and Vasudha could never forgive her for her authoritarian attitude towards her (177). After her death, she admitted that though she has prayed for Faiba's soul to rest in peace, she did not love her.

Before her marriage, Vasudha and Vyomesh had met only thrice and she could not get chance to talk about anything that really mattered. After their wedding, Vyomesh did what he liked and when he felt like and Vasudha was supposed to take care of the little arrangements for him. There was not even a minor change in Vyomesh's life but Vasudha's life became totally different. At the end of the day Vasudha felt a great pleasure in his arms. She did not know if it was the physical satisfaction of love or content in her mind, but her body and mind were one in happiness (16). But suddenly Vasudha felt that her once-bright and exciting world started having a fading lights and that Vyomesh's love had only one colour - the intoxicated colour of desire (17). Even at the time of her pregnancy or after that, Vyomesh neither took care of her nor did he show any affection. Vasudha thought that he would have shown that he actually loved and cared for her. He made the same demands even after the arrival of the baby. They lived together for thirty-two years of their lives but throughout the duration Vasudha felt that he was a sort of stranger. Eventually, on one day, Vyomesh came to her and said, "I can't live with you. I want separation" (222). Vasudha felt blank with shock at first but

then both of them reached to a decision that they would go for a divorce though Vasudha did not want to suffer such rejection after these many years. This shows that, though they were part of the family, they were not part of each other (196) and though two people are physically close to each other, they can be miles apart (213). Finally, at the end, a woman who took care of everything - home, relations and social dealings and also did everything that was expected of her, was given a 'reward' of the total investment of her life and love for him. It shows how although Vasudha was dominated by Faiba and Vyomesh, she always performed all her duties as a daughter-in-law and as a wife perfectly.

When after her marriage, Vasudha felt restricted at her in-laws' house, she often lost in the thoughts that why a mother-in-law must always control her daughter-in-law. Kundanika Kapadia successfully shifts the focus from Vasudha's outer conflicts to her inner conflicts. Through this, the novel moves to an emotional or psychological landscape and adds an interesting perspective towards this masterpiece. From the outset to the end of the novel, Vasudha keeps thinking about some questions that cannot be shared with others. On the day before her wedding, she thought for a moment that even if she does not have any reason or objection for not marrying Vyomesh, will it be possible for her to say 'no' for the marriage at the last minute or not. She says, "Vyomesh is good, he is well-to-do, he comes from a good family...but does it mean I can't say no to the marriage? Even if everything is settled, can't I still say no?" (7). After her marriage, as a newly wedded girl, she always felt that she was not one of the people at her in-law's house. She was always being watched there and she always longed for her life to be little easier and a little break from everyone's urge to constantly order her. When Faiba did not let her rest, she thought, "Do they think once a woman becomes a daughter-in-law she never gets tired?" (11). She thought she could openly share anything with her parents but it was not same here. When Faiba restrained her from doing reading and other favorite activities of her, she expressed her grief saying, "Once married does a woman have to shelve all her interests?" (13). She often lost in the thoughts that why a mother-in-law must always control her daughter-in-law. She often felt herself to be like a bird in a golden cage and thought, "This bird has wings. Outside the cage there is the sky and it is possible to fly up there. The bird knows that, that is the pain" (19). Women have always been made 'prisoners' under the guise of 'protection' (Vadgama). They were in a castle with invisible walls. They were protected, but were also imprisoned (65).

After being separated from Vyomesh after thirty-two years of marriage, Vasudha thought if it was selfish to want an existence separate from the family. But then she felt that after giving up her time and energy for others throughout her life, now it was the time for her to do something for herself. Every member of the family had own life to live so now she wanted to find out where she really was. It was not only a right, but a duty she needed to play towards herself (186). She said, "If I am not for myself, who is there for me?" (185). She wanted to decide her responsibilities by herself and wanted to live keeping herself in the center on her life. She furthered on the way to fulfil her wish to have a room of her own where she could be alone. She firmly decided to be honest and true and to avoid all the unnecessary formalities. She would show grief only if she feels truly sorry and if she would not like something, she would say so. She promised herself to be her

own person. Now her only aim in the life was to be free from illusions and to try to find out what is true and live accordingly (188). She interpreted this 'retirement' of hers as to be simple at heart, to be frank and open, to live according to her own understanding, not by others' expectations, to spend a time as per her wish and to have a right over her own body. In short, it simply means to live as per her heart's wish (190). She decided to establish her acquaintances with the trees, flowers and the sky again. It was her basic need in this totally new way of her life.

She ultimately succeeds to stay at her dream place named "Anandgram" which is also known as "Flower House". For her to leave home was not the end, but a wonderful beginning of her new journey. She resided there with many other men and women and learnt various new things. She finally started living with happiness that she chose for herself and she thought what a strange turn her life has taken. She also led a protest march with the placards against the rape criminals and got seriously wounded on her face and head due to charge of the police. But her efforts did not go in vain and this revolutionary act helped her to build her own 'independent' identity. She finally realized, 'I wasn't looking for happiness, I was searching for the right to be myself' (261). Thus, she finally fulfils her promise she gave to herself on the night before her wedding by challenging her husband's authoritative behaviour and finds her way to growth and fulfilment.

Conclusion

Thus, Ana, Sumitra and Vasudha chose to and struggled to be 'real women' rather than performing a role of merely an ideal daughter, wife, daughter-in-law or mother. They said that total responsibility and total freedom should go together and should be given the same importance. They have understood that their presence was nothing more than a 'necessity' for the males of their life and that can clearly be considered as just an addiction, not a pure and unconditional love. They opposed to their crushed aspirations, low self-esteem and a merit earned by sacrifice only. They firmly fought against the male authority by realizing that they were free to be free. Eventually, after such a long and hard journey of struggle, they succeeded in forming their identities as 'humans' and more importantly as the self-sufficient women.

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