

A JOURNEY FROM SUPPRESSION TO SPIRITUAL REDEMPTION: SEVEN STEPS IN THE SKY

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Key words: Suppression □ Women predicament – Resistance □ Illumination □
Accomplishment of true self □ Towards greater Spiritual redemption

Abstract:

This paper aims at examining socio-cultural factors which play a crucial role in deciding the duties of man and woman, women suppression, denial of identity and the possibility of emancipation, seeking true 'self' and there by attaining _ a spiritual salvation. Contemporary Gujarati literature mirror multifarious issues among which women subjugation and emancipation and problems of Dalit community are focused invariably. Many men as well as women novelists voice their predicament and plea for soci-cultural change.

'Seven Steps in the Sky' (*Saat Paglaan Aakashma*) - a Gujarati novel by Kundanika Kapadia is an epoch making novel in feminist Gujarati literature. It's a psychoanalytical novel analyzing how established socio-cultural aspects in form of husband, Faiba and others affect the woman and to the extent that she is denied her individualism. The novel, contributing towards the feminist cause explores depth of the psyche of the protagonist Vasudha, who after thirty two years of her suffocating and emotionally depressed married life, finally dares to challenge her husband's authority and leaves home to fulfill her aspirations. It shows that a woman is not confined to only childbirth, child rearing and household chores in four walls of the house. She is in search of identity emphasizing the urge for independence, autonomy, separateness, as goals of maturity and specially, the development of analytic and decision- making capacities. And finally oversteps her socio-culturally defined role to get individuality and goes towards achieving greater redemption in the laps of Himalayas. Her several steps and phases are illustrations of her emancipated journey to the transcendence of her 'self' from suppression to Spiritual redemption.

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Contemporary Gujarati novels aim at diverse issues – including societal concerns, problems of Dalit community, women emancipation and so on. The firmament of Gujarati feminist literature shines with the sparkling stars like_ Dhiruben Patel, Kundanika Kapadia, Suhas Oza, Varsha Adalja and many more. These women novelists, through their literary art, not only discuss the major problems of conjugal life, family, familial relationships, faced by women in society from Indian feminist perspective, but also portray a realistic picture of suppression of women in tradition-bound society and culture. Their novel mirror that, prevalent inequality between men and women, is due to diverse standards of society and culture, which calls for awakening in women community who, until few decades withstood of these systems owing to their immense capacity of tolerance and lack of awareness.

Kundanika Kapadia has been considered as one of the major voices who pleads for women emancipation. Her feminist novel *Seven Steps in the Sky* (*Saat Paglaan Aakashman* – A Gujarati novel) generated a sound criticism as well as contemplation and controversy. Throughout Gujarat, a series of lectures, Seminars and symposiums are organized on it. It has been criticized both negatively and positively, with the demand that she should be sent to the prison and she should be awarded a Nobel Prize.

The words; ‘Suppression’ and ‘Spiritual Redemption’ have deeper connotations and implications. In a broad sense of the word ‘Suppression’, means an action of subduing anything, it is also equivalent to oppression or have authority over something. With the context of women in the world the word has tragic association. It denotes humiliation, tyranny on and helplessness, pain, suffering, predicament of women in patriarchal soci-cultural environment in a cruel and unjust manner.

‘Spiritual redemption’ connotes a broad meaning encompassing various disciplines. Normally it is associated with spirituality in religion, where a state of being spiritual means an awakened and illuminated soul, on the way to God, on the way to a wide vision irrespective of individuality, to a greater perfection, wholeness and goodness instead of narrow mindedness, a greater insight towards the world with all of its inhabitants at large. The ultimate fruit of spirituality is salvation, redemption of the self which cannot be done by one for the sake of other. It is an individual effort. Alice A. Bailey says:

“The word "spiritual" does not refer to religious matters, so-called. All activity which drives the human being forward towards some form of development—physical, emotional, mental, intuitional, social—if it is in advance of his present state is essentially spiritual in nature and is indicative of the livingness of the inner divine entity. The spirit of man is undying; it forever endures, progressing from point to point and stage to stage upon the Path of Evolution, unfolding steadily and sequentially the divine attributes and aspects.” (<http://www.bailey.it/>)

In relation to feminist literature, spiritual vision stands for search for the ‘self’, being sacred to ‘self’, celebrating the power of ‘self’ and a transcendence of ‘self’, an evolution of individual consciousness. Spirituality, here is a matter of finding the purpose of, meaning of, one’s life.

In Gujarati feminist literature, *Seven Steps in the Sky* by Kundanika Kapadia heralded the dawn of feminism. Kundanika Kapadia is one of the most eminent short story and fiction writers of the post-independence period. She won the first prize for her very first short story *Premnan Ansu* in the short story competition organized by the New York Herald Tribune. Then after, she published her novels, *Agan Pipasa* (1972) and Sahitya Akademi-winner *Seven Steps in the Sky* (1984). She, in this novel delves deeply into the innermost psyche of women and points an accusing finger towards the male dominated society. Right from the beginning she has written against injustices to women and their exploitation. But her anger becomes anguish in *Seven Steps in the Sky*. Like her contemporary writer Dhiruben Patel, she believes that a change in the condition of women must begin with a change in their own consciousness. For her life is constant opening of new vistas. Pooja Tatsat describes the novel as:

“*Seven Steps in the Sky*’ is undoubtedly significant in the backdrop of its history. In 1984, it was the first of its type to project feminism which was not in vogue in those days. The readers were of 1980, when the Indian middle class women were completely unaware of feminism, when there were not many successful, optimistic and exemplary female ideals. At that time, feminist expression by Kundanika Kapadia is not only admirable but also considered the first to sow seeds of it.” (Tatsat 75)

Seven Steps in the Sky is a story of the suppression and spiritual evolution of the protagonist Vasudha, and her illumination towards truth. Kundanika Kapadia explains the title thus:

“*Seven Steps* is the symbol of marriage ceremony in Hindu Society; *Sky* is the symbol of freedom and space. The story tells of Vasudha, who, after thirty- two years of marriage and servility, dares to challenge her husband’s authoritative behavior and finds her way to growth and fulfillment.”(Kapadia viii)

The novel begins with Vasudha’s departure to Himalayas to celebrate her true self with her childhood friend Aditya. But, before that, what leads her to this way, her suppressed life, suffocated self, moans among the pages. Her life can be described through three phases – The suppressive life after marriage, her revolt, and her spiritual regeneration. The first phase of her life is full of subordination, repression, mental stress and ends with her decision to revolt. She gets married before she could complete her education and her wishes, likes or dislikes don’t matter. Education serves as a tool to awake the consciousness of a girl, in which rigid society is uninterested. From the beginning of her married life, she has a dream:

“Someday I shall live like that bird, she promised herself. Tomorrow 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 pressure. I will compose my song and sing it too.” (Kapadia 9)

But, her dream scatters under the domination of her husband and petulant Faiba. She becomes the victim of their atrocities, bans, restrictions, suspicions, conservations, and ego. They treat her as a dumb animal, everything was her husband-centered; to them she is just a tool to make everything convenient. Faiba is nonetheless than a commander, ordering her, monitoring her, constantly. She is considered a storehouse of endless energy. Conservative Faiba is also a woman, but can’t understand her.

Which God she should worship, what should she do, where should she go, to whom and how many times she should write a letter, or sit in a balcony, visit parents, hum a tune or walk joyfully, writing down daily expenses, how much money should be spent and so on and so forth..... to be decided by Faiba. For her she is just a creature to be tamed anyway. Her likes and dislikes do not have any place as her husband’s, are to be taken care of. Her preferences have no value, even reading book is considered a bad habit. She feels suffocated. Her condition is not of individual’s but of all suppressed women. Dr. Kalpana Machchhar observes:

“Our life has been changing and a woman has to play dual roles, on one side there is a challenge from changing time for self and conventional societal role, values to observe on the other. External job stresses for intelligence, education, decision power and ambition whereas internal or domestic role demand dumb work, sacrifice, service, dedication, in short, living for society according to its norms, as a consequence, a woman suffers conflict and does not know that in trying to please everyone she forgets to please herself.....or if wants cannot perhaps....”(Machchhar 116)

The lack of affinity in their marital relationship is obvious, she should be on her toe for every demand of her husband, and either it can be material, social, physical or mental. The divinity of marriage is not seen any way. For Vasudha the marriage is a sacred bond in which a husband treats a wife as a friend, an equal to him, she says what she feels like:

‘To marry is to take first step in the divinity,’ a poet has said, but in reality, when a woman marries she steps into the land of restrictions.”(Kapadia 10)

Majority of the incidents in the novel projects the mental and emotional vacuity felt by the protagonist due to suppression. It is a social belief that motherhood makes woman complete. But the novelist’s thoughts on motherhood are astounding to society. She writes, “In our society motherhood is praised greatly, but it is just a ‘myth’ rather a hypocrisy.” (Kapadia 15) But Manjuben Zaveri disagrees with the novelist and says:

“When Vasudha conceives for the first time the novelist’s statements astonishes us. Several deliveries and scarcity of money may make pregnancy a burden. Otherwise, for this so-called burden what is not done by women? The first move of the child in her womb thrills her.” (qtd. In Shukla 22)

It can be a matter of joy, but for Vasudha, it becomes an addition to her drudgery. At the age of twenty five, she becomes mother of three children and during these days, she does not get any warmth, feelings or care from anyone in the house. During her first pregnancy, she is not sent to her parents as it will be difficult to run around for her husband if any complications arise, and when her health deteriorates after the birth of her third son she is immediately sent to her parents because her husband cannot take leave to take her to hill station. She is called back from her

parents not out of love but of inconvenience in household chores. She is held responsible for the misdeeds of children but their good deeds always credited to their father's.

Dowry is a kind of maintenance surely given by parents to their son-in-law, as he is going to keep their daughter after marriage, is revealed by the incident of Sumitra, who has run away from her home because her parents were ready to give dowry. Vyomesh finds nothing wrong in taking dowry. For him, it is a kind of compensation from the parents of a girl to her husband as he is going to maintain her, feed her, and clothe her throughout her life. Vasudha is not allowed to shelter her, as Vyomesh does not want. Moreover, it is his house and he is to decide who will live there. Women have been silenced and muffled by society since their childhood in order to maintain male supremacy in form of soci-cultural taboos. The trauma of that silence is emotionally as well as bluntly expressed by the poet Mrinal Pande in her poem, "Two Women Knitting":

"Their dark secrets still lie locked within

They have thrown the keys to their jewel casques in the lake.

Put the keys in, and their locks will bleed real blood." (qtd. in Zide 169)

Economical dependency also enhances the self-esteem. Vasudha is a kind of 'workhorse' harnessed in domestic chores, unpaid as she is economically dependent on husband for that, proves critical to the extent that she fails to help Asha, for only five hundred rupees and she commits a suicide, that makes her guilty. Aruna Baxi states:

"Feminist writer's plea for education and economic independence for a woman, so she is not mortgage her 'self' to her husband or anyone else. Ismat Chughtai says that if a woman lives with a man for food shelter, food and cloths then she is no more than a 'tawayaf'." (Baxi 144)

She is to inform about and take permission for everything can be seen in the incident of the death of her mother. She gets a telegram informing her mother's critical death, and Faiba did not allow her to go without Vyomesh's permission. Meanwhile, Faiba slips on the floor and to be kept in the hospital for two days and Vasudha has to be there to nurse her though her mother is on the deathbed, and when Vasudha reaches her home she find her mother's pyre cold for four hours.

Going through all these assaults, she feels a burning volcano inside her, ready to explode, but when? She does not know. Her agitation and restlessness are smoldering her internally. She is experiencing impurity, discord, sorrow, affliction, helplessness, and scattered self_ is stamped on every page, where she experiences like a parrot in the golden cage. She wants to grow like a tree, outgrowing all her limitations. She thinks of having a new path:

“.....now I have to walk on a new path. It may be shaded with green trees, or it may be hot and strewn with thorns, losing itself on the horizon; I don't know which.”(Kapadia 103)

Her self-realization starts with Vyomesh's reaction to the death of Faiba and that is the second phase of her life, there starts her journey from being to becoming. Faiba, who devoted her whole life to Vyomesh's growth, her death does not make much difference to him. It shakes Vasudha from within, and she thinks that what is the use of spending whole life for a man who even does not care about your death? And the volcano explodes with taking her decisions at her own without bothering about Vyomesh. The mood of the protagonist and of nature shows great affinity here and is beautifully delineated .by Kundanika Kapadia:

“But that day a very strong breeze blew and all the doors and windows of her mind burst open. She thought: this is the signal. There is no need to delay anymore.”(Kapadia 185)

As her evolving consciousness begins, she in turn creates a system of belief that consequently results into birth of her new self as she aspired to be on the very first day of her marriage. Now, she doesn't want to be an ideal woman, but a true woman, this astonishes her family, for them it is something unheard of. Her anti- patriarchal decisions_ to have her own room, to go for a walk, and to give her jewelry to Salina and to permit Sunila to go for rehearsal on the day of mourning, to agree with Ashesh and Sunila's decision to set up separate home, and to oppose the idea of a feast for Brahmins, infuriates Vyomesh to the extent that he assaults her verbally and physically.

“.....this is my house and things will be done as I wish..... I have sweated for all these things in the house. They are mine, every single thing.”(Kapadia 200)

Vasudha replied in cracking voice, "...and haven't I worked all these years too? Haven't I slaved for the house? Vyomesh shouted, and haven't you eaten all these years? Haven't you been clothed and sheltered- didn't they cost me anything?" (Kapadia 215)

A woman has no right to claim her home anywhere; as the society believes that a woman's true home after marriage is her husband's. To her parents she is an alien after marriage and to husband an outsider. In family, where man is a sole provider a woman cannot have better fate than this, and Masilamani comments:

"The Indian husband's total preoccupation with himself, his image as a 'Provider' around himself, around whom the wife orbits effacing herself completely as she ministers to his needs is the one that has a divine blessing and society's sanction. Its corner-stone of society's edifice of patriarchal society and within this structure any disagreement seems blasphemous." (Masilamani 169)

When Vyomesh asks her for separation and offers to pay maintenance every month or lump sum she has a complete black out. Her predicament is described thus:

"After all these years to suffer such rejection! He hadn't given any explanation- simply announced such a final thing!" (Kapadia 223)

His words have thrown her in abyss and after prolonged contemplation she decides to leave the house after initial feelings of bitterness and revenge. Outer landscape clears all her bewilderment and conflict. Her decision to be true and honest to her 'self' shows her firmness which has developed through her suffering. Her world is changed as her mind is open to the power of consciousness, all the traditional roles shook off and realization of the true self. She finds there no division between herself and the sky. She feels she has become one with the sky. The novelist's choice of the names of the character is akin to the theme of spiritual redemption. 'Vasudha' means the 'earth' 'Aditya' means the 'Sun', and 'Vyomesh' 'Vyom' means the 'sky' and 'ish' means the owner, who tries to dominate the earth: 'ish' word has a spirit of 'ownership' : As much as Vyomesh tries to dominate 'Vasudha' she slips away from him. : 'Aditya' (Sun) is far away from her, in the Himalayas (Sky) but becomes a source of warmth and new life and redemption to her.

The words she uses and the approach she shows towards her victimizer are of a person who is truly redeemed. Her thoughts are:

“I have resolved, I must free Vyomesh. Here the false and weak relationship of the past should end. It was futile to cling on, to burn up, to struggle in vain- the sky looks at all things with equanimity. I must be the same. There is no pain unless you hold on to things- to perceive truth as truth is to begin to put an end to miseries.”(Kapadia 224)

She leaves the house and goes to her cousin Vinod’s home and then to Anandgram. Here, ‘Vinod’ the name of the character has been chosen thematically. ‘Vinod’ means ‘joy’ and ‘Anandgram’ means a place full of joy, bliss, where she accomplishes her material, moral, spiritual growth and freedom. She achieves ‘SATCHITANANDA’, (‘sat’ means truth, ‘chit’ means consciousness, and ‘anand’ means joy) a state requisite for spiritual growth as stated by Swami Sivananda in ‘Moksha Gita’:

ब्रह्माहं सच्चिदानन्दं शुद्धोऽहममरोऽव्ययः ।
अमेयो निर्भयोऽकालो विरक्तो गतिवर्जितः ॥
अदेहचित्तसंबन्धो निष्कर्माहमतीन्द्रियः ॥५॥ (<http://www.swami-krishnananda.org/>)

(“I am Sat-Chit-Ananda Brahman. I am pure, infinite, unattached, timeless, motionless, deathless, decayless and fearless. I have no connection with the body and mind. I am actionless, formless.)

As the shloka describes, Vasudha has realized the highest state of realization. And after taking a lead in a protest march against rape of a girl, she is wounded, and then she thinks for greater salvation. From true self to the service of the mankind by living in the lap of Himalayas. In Hindu mythology, people go to Himalaya for a greater redemption, salvation as Pandavas did in Mahabharata. Vasudha too, wants to go on the same path, in the lap of Himalayas and from there to step in the sky.

Vasudha’s spiritual journey begins her dream of her own tune and ends with the fructification of that tune.

“All these years, while caring for her husband, raising up the children, discharging her social duties, these was that glimpse of something bright and enchanting; half visible and half veiled, and now the time had come to reach for it.”(Kapadia 14)

The shift has awakened her and she at a stroke leaves everything and goes towards more human, more elevated being. Her efforts to get out of the box- at the age of 53 are steps to her awakening.

Like Jonathan Livingstone Seagull she surpasses all the limitations of life, allows to slip the sand of life from her fist, break through all those hurdles, suffering, setbacks and condemnation in the process and falling back. In this spiritual journey to the self, a quest for self ends in having realized it fully, all the bonds thrown off and emerges a more mature, more grown, more illuminated being to be an inspiration to all. From the dark, physical married world with Vyomesh, Vasudha paces towards Himalaya, a land of light with the man 'Aditya' whose name itself means the god of light. 'Himalaya and Sky' suggests the sublime spirit of a man-woman relationship. DR. Bharatkumar Thakar writes:

“ Vasudha, Ana, Sumitra break through hellish, dependency, tyrannical patriarchal confinement and becomes the citizen of” Anandgram’ hug love, devotion, freedom, equality, fraternity, and live their lives in their own ways and by that accomplish their moral and material, ethical and spiritual growth. Their awareness does not remain limited to mankind but extends to every creation of God, animals, trees, plants, fruits, flowers and all the aspects of nature. The novelist by that wants to emphasis on the maxim of Indian culture_ “*Vasudhaiva Kutumbkam*”(Thakar 24)

And an illuminated self is ready to step off the earth and to step in the sky, to the greater height to serve humanity by establishing a new 'Anandgram' where she will be accompanied by a man, Aditya (Sun) her childhood friend. In this way, Vasudha, a daughter of the Sun, finally steps towards him and accomplishes her redemption. Being free does not mean renouncement of man, only shaking off the gender role prescribed by him. A man is not unwelcome, but his patriarchal norms, shackles are.

Thus, the novel is a journey of its protagonist from repression to redemption. The novelist not only aims at the emancipation of women but also revealed the dark side of the marital relationship in the society through the male-female characters in the novel. The novelist has very beautifully woven the fabric of the novel in which all the elements contribute to the expression of female psyche and reveal that how female assertion and existence is ignored and how it can be asserted in the society. The women predicament becomes more effective when it is portrayed by a woman and that's true in the case of Kundanika Kapadia, who has delineated that a woman can not only fight for her self-esteem but also leave the patriarchal yoke showing her firmness to live by her own, like Nora, the protagonist of Ibsen's play 'Dolls House'. The rainbow of seven steps has

made Gujarati (Indian) literature colourful and beautiful: its timeless and for years it will become an instrument for the creativity of Kundanika Kapadia as well as of Gujarat, and there is no doubt about it.

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