



Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596

An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

Indexed in: ROAD & Google Scholar

**A Feminist Exploration of Marriage in Kundanika Kapadia's Seven
Steps in the Sky**

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Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596

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Abstract:

Woman is honoured as goddess among the Hindus in Gujarat and India. She is also respected and worshipped as Shakti (goddess of power) and Laxmi (goddess of wealth). She is considered an idol of love and sacrifice. But she is also exploited in the name of tyagmurti (idol of sacrifice). The social issue of marriage becomes the prominent one in Gujarati novels. It takes varying interpretations so as to make an analysis on basis of feminism. In this paper, I intend to work on the same lines. By keeping the novel Saat Pagla Aakash Maa by Kundanika Kapadia at core, I'll analyze the issue of marriage in Kapadia's novel from feminist perspective. Marriage for Vasudha was like making her an ideal woman not real woman. The decision to leave her husband and stay in Anandagram proves her identity as a real woman. For the entire life she suffered like mother earth to keep her promises of the seven steps, the words literal meaning the starting of a new life after marriage. Marriage has been considered as the promise of happiness and freedom in life but the novel of Kundanika Kapadia portrays it in contradictory manner.

History of Gujarati Literature:

Gujarati is an Indian language spoken in the state of Gujarat. Gujarati literature may be traced to the sultanate days. Literature flourished during the period. Well known litterateurs during that period were Akho, Vallabh, and Shamal. The history of Gujarati literature may be traced to 1000 AD, and this literature has flourished since then to the present. It is unique in having almost no patronage from a ruling dynasty, other than its composers. Well known laureates of Gujarati literature are Hemchandracharya, Narsinh Mehta, Mirabai, Akho, Premanand Bhatt, Shamal Bhatt, Dayaram, Dalpatram, Narmad, Govardhanram Tripathi, Gandhiji, K. M. Munshi, Umashankar Joshi, Suresh Joshi, Pannalal Patel and Rajendra Keshavlal Shah. Gujarat Vidhya Sabha, Gujarat Sahitya Sabha, and Gujarati Sahitya Parishad are Ahmedabad-based literary institutions promoting the spread of Gujarati literature. The poet Dalpatram is considered to be the father of modern Gujarati literature.

With the advent of the British in the 19th century, poetic literature touched greater heights. Dalpat and Narmad were stalwarts of this age. A few decades later the Gandhian influence became predominant. The noted poets of this period were Kalapi, Kant, Nanalal and Balavantrai Thakor. Noted poets associated with the freedom struggle included Sundaram, Shesh, Snehrasmi and Betai. During the 40s, there was an upsurge of communist poetry influenced by progressive thinkers like Meghani, Bhogilal Gandhi, Swapnastha among others preached class conflict and hatred of religion through their writings. Umashankar Joshi too published



his famous works during this period. His writing, greatly inspired by Tagore, enriched Gujarati poetry. Among the prominent prose writers in the late 19th century was Naval Ram, who was also a critic. Nand Shankar, first novelist of his time, wrote Karanghelo a historical fiction. Govardhanram Tripathi's Saraswati Chandra is a masterpiece not only in Gujarati but also in Indian literature. This was the first social novel based on contemporary issues and their solutions. The social issue of marriage becomes the prominent one in Gujarati novels. It takes varying interpretations so as to make an analysis on basis of feminism. In this paper, I intend to work on the same lines. By keeping the novel Saat Pagla Aakash Maa by Kundanika Kapadia at core, I'll analyze the issue of marriage in Kapadia's novel from feminist perspective.

Woman and Marriage:

Woman is honoured as goddess among the Hindus in Gujarat and India. She is also respected and worshipped as Shakti (goddess of power) and Laxmi (goddess of wealth). She is considered an idol of love and sacrifice. But she is also exploited in the name of tyagmurti (idol of sacrifice). She takes care of her home as Annapurna (Cooking and providing food to full satisfaction). But many times she has to live a life of a captive in the four walls of her home. She has to suppress her aspirations and desires in the name of maryada or traditions.

Patriarchy is still a tradition in urban and rural India. There is an equal contribution of men and women in society. Both are inevitable wheels to run the chariot of life. But man has not yet completely freed himself from some age-old concepts of superiority. Man takes a woman as a useful addition to his life, an object of enjoyment and a possession – upabhoga. He has all freedom in life. He decides everything about social, economic, and other aspects of life. Simone de Beauvoir's well-known statement in *The Second Sex* (1997), "one is not born a woman, one becomes one" (Beauvoir) has a special relevance to India where conventions, religious and social taboos dictate and inhibit woman's individuality. Meena Shiwadkar in *The Image of Indian Woman in the Indo-Anglian Novel* (1979) writes: "The behavioral patterns for the Indian women are predetermined by the family and caste into which one is born and values and traditions of a culture that upholds archetypal images of women. Ancient Indian literature and mythology have internalized the concept of the sacrificing mother and the devoted, enduring wife through the image of Sati, Savitri and Shakuntala" (Shiwadkar). A woman is called Devi if she accepts the subordinate place. She is supposed to be meek, good wife or daughter in law. In marriage, Vasudha is one such woman. She always felt that all the women were in a castle with invisible walls. They were protected but were also imprisoned. A woman's



world is kept limited so that she silently accepts everything as it is.

A woman as life partner has a fourfold character: she is ardhagini, one half of the her husband, metaphorically speaking; sahadharmini, an associate in the fulfillment of human and divine goals; sahakarmini, a part to all her husband's action and sahayogini, a veritable cooperator in all his ventures. Husband and wife together are called dampati, joint owners of the household, sharing work in terms of their biological, psychological and individual dharma. As Kapadia writes in the "Preface" to the novel also, the husband desires a special person as a wife – "A courtier in terms of work, a servant in terms of action, a mother in terms of giving food and the beautiful nymph on the bed. (karyeshumantri, karmeshudasi, bhojeshumata, shayaneshurambha)" (Kapadia).

Marital discord represents a breakdown in the consensus and co-operation of the married couples. Usually, marital discord originates when rivalry develops between the partners by internal and external manifestations like separation, physical violence and vituperation. They drift apart when they are unable to sort-out their problems which result in the strain and tension in their relationship. According to C.B. Matoria, "Desertion and divorce are the final tragic denouements of family disorganization" (Matoria, 1960, p.384). Vasudha had no option but to leave her house to assert herself in the Indian society.

Exploring Marriage in *Seven Steps in the Sky*:

The opening chapter sets the tone for the entire novel – the question of a woman in the society, her happiness, in fact her true happiness in the male-dominated society, the view of the society people, her traditions, etc. The description of the surrounding full of flowers create an atmosphere of optimism in the novel, which otherwise addresses problems of the flower of the society i.e. a woman. The place where the group of the narrator, along with Vasudha, the female protagonist of the novel, meets is described as surrounding with beautiful flowers. The day described here is when they are discussing the issue of Vasudha – the way of life in which a woman desires to live. For Ana, such way could be difficult while for Alopa the woman needs courage to do so, as it was anti-societal. For Vinod and Mitra, the males of the group, she needs to have her own means of livelihood too. She needs not only to struggle but prepare for being "unhappy". Vasudha questions the idea of happiness for a woman, which none of the group members were able to answer or were reluctant to do so.



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In her childhood, Vasudha liked evening time. She always spent some time on the roof. After marriage she loved the balcony in the flat. She loved to sit there quietly, watching the sunshine on the flowers and the silver sea in the moonlight. She felt that they had their own music. There was music in silence of the night and in the light of the dawn. She liked to listen to it. She liked to read Munshi, Dhumketu, R. V. Desai, translations of Sharadbabu and Tagore, of Shakespeare and Ibsen. She had even tried to read the poems of Shelly and Arnold. She read whatever she could find. Her father was very proud of her. However the same thing was a disqualification in Faiba's eyes. According to her reading was a bad habit.

The novel portrays the married life of Vasudha and Vyomesh, after some thirty years is about to be shattered. Vasudha is average, educated woman with sharp sensibility but submissive by temperament in the beginning. Her character develops as she become more and more conscious of her individuality. Vyomesh and Faiba are the blind followers of the present economic system and social traditions. She is made a victim by some obvious and by some subtle ways of injustice. The rift gradually widens her awareness to injustice hurts her deeply, forces her to struggle, and finally she leaves her home for Anandgram, where her own identity will be appreciated. But all are not so lucky as to take such revolutionary step in life like Vasudha. The story of other women characters, who live in the locality of Vasudha, narrates the other side of the coin. Marriage is an important issue that is pivotal in the life of these characters. The rebels are brought in the Anandgram – Mitra, Anna, Alopa, Lalita. Vasudha goes to the Himalayas in the company of Aditya, her dream-boy whom she has securely placed in her subconscious.

Vasudha is the main character in the novel. She suffers by her husband Vyomesh and Faiba. After wedding she became an ideal woman. She destroyed her thoughts and desire made before marriage. As soon as Vasudha got married to Vyomesh, her life took a u-turn. Her heart would cry at the injustice done to her but by nature she was meek. Moreover, she was taught not to displease her in-laws. Before marriage her though, "One day I shall live in tune with my wishes. I will say yes if I want to or not if I so desire. I will not live under any pressure. I will compose my song and sing it too" (Kapadia). But after marriage, she was quite, gentle and always did what Vyomesh and Faiba wanted her to do so. She never tried to express her own opinion. She never said anything and kept on working. There was no chance using her mind. Everything was to be done according to Faiba's wish. She had to arrange her schedule as per the requirement of Vyomesh. Her desires, likes and dislikes had no space in that house.

The novel narrates different experiences of time and status in life of Vasudha. Before marriage, she was on



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her terrace, a place she loved to visit during evening, found herself encountered with a number of questions. She wished to say no to marriage, which was the next day, not because she loved Aditya, a neighbor or she disliked Vyomesh. It was her desire to stay free, live a life of freedom. She was the third of five daughters and due to the responsibility of family, burden of father, fear of neighbors and relatives' talks, she can't say no. After marriage, she used to sit in balcony and watch evening, the same way she did on her terrace. Vyomesh came at home, didn't find Vasudha at door and became too angry with her. The fear of her husband remained in her like an inherent force. She used to come back home from anywhere at that time and never after that she sat in the balcony to enjoy the evening. Her dream to fly free like the bird never became true. The house of Vyomesh was a nice place, as far as luxuries were concerned, but here she was not the queen but 'the king's good wife' or even 'a servant'. She felt as if she was 'like a bird in a golden cage.' Even though the material conditions are very nice, there is no freedom even though the idea of freedom was there – "... it 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" (Kapadia). The pain of Vasudha is not only the knowledge of reality but to pretend to be unknown or unaware of it. Vasudha questions the idea of marriage from the woman's viewpoint. It's the final aim of parents to get their daughters married otherwise the society ridicules them, thus making the daughter burden on family. Such thoughts about the life in fenced house make her weary but she can't protest as the house belongs to the male. The only thing where she can complain is 'the sky beyond the wall' but it is addressed to none. There is no one to hear to the pain or cry of woman except the lonely sky. The problems of Vasudha, in the words of the narrator, 'are the problems of all women'.

Such condition of woman in marriage is not only restricted to East but found in West too. Betty Friedan's pivotal work *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) argued that American women of that era were enslaved by domesticity and defined by their roles as mother and wife. Although she called the family a 'comfortable concentration camp', Friedan's goal was not to eliminate marriage. She merely wanted women to insist on more from life, for them to reach outside of marriage for fulfillment. There evolved a theory of patriarchy, of male capitalism, in which women were oppressed as much by male culture as they were by the economic system. These twin evils supported each other on the collective back of women. The instance of economic system can be viewed best in the case of Vasudha. She can't provide economic support due to getting married and hence not educated. For Vasudha, a woman fits in the economic theory of laborers. They are prevented from education so as to continue the supply of workers and prevent their further emancipation. A neighbor, Ranjana, visits Vasudha and in agony asks for five hundred rupees, which she saved from



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household spending but was taken by her husband and given to Lakshmi, her maid. The reason was needless to say, as Ranjana informs about it to Vasudha. Vasudha never had such big amount of money with her and was helpless. But she decided to talk to her husband. That evening, she made Vyomesh's loving food, and even prepared to be in bed with him so as to ask for money. But when she did, Vyomesh didn't think a bit and rejected the offer saying, "Money Doesn't grow on trees, to be given when you demand it" (Kapadia). The refusal was too much heart breaking for Vasudha who wish to go and inform Ranjana that she was in the same boat, alike her. Their husbands never trust them for anything and consider them as 'lazy creatures to sit at home and eat'. Women in India never had such economic freedom. In her childhood, they were protected by their parents and brothers, after marriage by husband and in old age by children. In a sense, this over-protective attitude has taken the economic and social freedom the women like Vasudha and others. Even if the married woman is working she is not relieved from the household chores. The example of Nalini is the illuminating example of this. Nalini, a working housewife, explains the double burden of a working wife – office work and responsibilities at home. Her husband never helps her. But her husband Shyam never helps her even though she is working and considers her as 'storehouse of unending energy' with 'limitless strength'. She even had no time to enjoy life or even take a walk on the shore.

The girl dreams of a dream life in marriage. Vasudha is no exception in this. Vasudha will imagine the situation in which she would be asked about her wishes by her husband. He would ask her what she felt about marriage, her views about not marrying, etc. But this never happened and the desire of happiness from marriage turned out to be merely a mirage, as the idea of happiness was different on both the sides. Her desire had no place in the life after marriage while for her husband 'his love had only one side, that of desire: "You should be at the door when I come home; I should have you when I want you". Even her coming near to him, complaining about being tired, meant only one thing for Vyomesh – "the intoxicated color of desire" (Kapadia). The view is supported by Sonia Johnson in her essay Taking Our Eyes Off the Guys. Sonia Johnson explains: "Women have been seasoned as slaves and prostitutes...But no matter how we're seasoned -- as prostitute or as wife, which is the same thing -- we're seasoned in the patriarchal family almost exclusively to serve sexual functions" (Johnson).

In India, arranged marriages are always preferred. Love marriages are viewed as a social sin and are regarded with shame. Many Indians argue that romantic love does not necessarily lead to a good marriage, and often fails once the passion dissipates, whereas real love flows from a properly arranged union between two individuals. One such example is provided in the novel too. The love marriage of Satish and Vasanti



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was on the common liking of music and singing. But it was not the only basis of their love, which Vasanti realizes later in her marriage. According to Vasanti, the love of a male is about the beauty, physical beauty of a woman. But it is not real love. In fact its love of a woman 'covered in rice, lentils, spices, lipsticks and makeup'. This should be dejected by feminist, as Vasanti does so. Vasudha questions her feelings about Satish's leaving her alone on anniversary with Sugiti. Vasanti replies that it was ignorance, humiliation and jealousy of another woman that she felt.

A number of married couples are portrayed in the novel – Sumitra-Animesh, Vasanti-Satish, Ranjana-Deepak and even Vasudha and Vyomesh. They are all the typically found couples in the Indian society. The ideality comes with the couple of Isha-Swarup. A woman desires a husband as a companion not as a master. Swarup, narrator's husband, is a perfect model of it. Even though, he had a good paying job, he resigned due to political games in the office. He decided to do agricultural work and allowed Isha, the narrator, to write. Both will work to earn their livelihood. They had agreed on making food in rotation. When narrator informed about writing novel, he was very happy and even proposed to sit with a placard – "Work in progress, don't enter". This attitude is completely contrasting to husbands discussed before in the novel.

Woman's work was never considered productive and lacked monetary value as compared to that of males. Even if she earned money, she was to do household work. She had to carry many works, which were exclusively assigned to her only – cooking, nourishing children, living in shelters, bearing male and in-laws' atrocities, get married to serve man, wearing a mangal-sutra and a bindi for the well-being of males and as a symbol of their being married, leaving aside her talent for marriage, working like a laboured in her house, fasting. No male is assigned any such duty or ever thinks of performing any such task. Sushila was in tears when her mangal-sutra was taken away and inquired if her husband would wear it. Even though woman sacrificed her entire identity, including her family and even her religion and surname, she gets nothing in return except becoming a show-piece to heighten the social status of man. She is never assigned equality, freedom and choice in her life and her plight matches always with that of Vasudha but rarely, even in negligible form, with that of Isha, the narrator. If a woman dies, she is referred to as so and so's wife or widow but it is not said for the man. The name of father is joined with the son so as to indicate to the lineage but the name of the mother is not joined after boy or even after girl. She is erased with her death while the male remains immortal.



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In India, as there is the custom and tradition of joint family, a bride has to face her tyrannical in-laws, and traditional Hindu society still rejects divorcees. The novelist refers to number of woman around Vasudha to portray one or the other atrocity of the males. Sumitra believed that males want ownership. Her grandfather, a leader and a teacher, used to beat his wife with stick to exert his ownership. He would hit so hard as to kill her and shout, "If she dies, I can get another, there is no shortage of these stupid creatures" (Kapadia). Woman is a commodity and an animal. Ranjana had to eat all the left-overs and sometimes eat less if not left. No longer a woman but an animal to consume left-over of a family. Leena needs to show her modesty by working like a machine without stopping or complaining as she is to entertain relatives of her husband, who in return never or rarely in mood cares for her relatives. On death occasion, males are never forced to wear particular white clothes but females are. Even they have to wear such clothes as long as a year if the dead person is a near relative. Males don't have time to grieve. Vasudha is shocked by such biases of the society but keeps silent, as she has no strength to revolt against it.

To understand Eastern feminism, one must understand the important role sexuality plays in our culture. The case of Asha is the best one here. She was made pregnant and had to commit suicide. For Vyomesh, the blame is on Asha and not on the male. But Vasudha questions the immorality of the man who made her pregnant. They are discouraged from taking an active role or even allowing themselves to experience the act as pleasurable. Women are taught that they should not be open to their sexual desires. A husband can have affair and go without harm but a wife is always considered as a dark-spot even if a husband has doubt on her. Lalita was beaten by her husband Sudhir as he has doubt that she might had an affair. Sudhir was very well earning, well educated, English speaking, well reputed and well received person in the society but this made no impact on his traditional, orthodox and narrow-minded mentality of being a husband.

The status of women in modern India is a sort of a paradox. If on one hand she is at the peak of ladder of success, on the other hand she is mutely suffering the violence afflicted on her by her own family members. As compared with past women in modern times have achieved a lot but in reality they have to still travel a long way. Their path is full of roadblocks. The women have left the secured domain of their home and are now in the battlefield of life, fully armored with their talent. The rebel character of Sumitra is the one who is to light the torch of rebellion for Vasudha to follow. Vasudha met Sumitra in a garden. Sumitra argued about the marriage being the only goal of a female's life. She studies for it and when found a proper boy is being married, studies being left. For Vasudha her words were the experience of her life. During their conversation, a number of issues concerning the woman in the Indian society sprang up. For Sumitra, they



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were issues to be debated but for Vasudha they were the reality of her life. The woman passes her entire life in sacrifice – initially marries for the family so that the burden of daughter be shed off, then sacrifices her hobbies for the husband and his family, works for the nourishment of the child and in the end finds no time for her happiness. This is what Vasudha had done till then in her life. But she never spoke or heard about such things, just felt them. It was for the first time that she was hearing her life being said though in another's words. Sumitra was in love with a boy in her college but was refused by her family. Her family forced her to marry a doctor who even asked for dowry. She takes a rebellion step by leaving her house. Vasudha gives shelter to her but the reprimand of her husband forces Sumitra to leave the house. Vasudha wishes that some day she will be continue the rebellion of Sumitra. It took her more than three decades to take a rebellious step. She left the safe shelter of husband to prove her own identity in the Indian traditional and orthodox world. A female looking for an identity in a patriarchal world is an issue of concern for the feminist too. Vasudha's case is the glowing example of a feminist ideology, which has no restrictions of age, caste, etc. which are being set up by the Indian society. In this novel, the author satirizes male dominated society. A feminist novel tries to give social, economical, and cultural equality to women. It attacks the narrow minded attitude of man and the subordination and submissiveness of women. It gives voice to the feelings and pains of women all over the world. She is really the epitome of all women. She represents woman as caged birds who long to enjoy the freedom in the sky but are suppressed under various reasons. She became a revolutionary lady at 52 years. In that time she left house and started living in Anandgram. She performs a number of acts, which she never did before this. She takes an evening bath. She felt the lightness when she removed the string of marriage for the first time. Her steps that evening were very much against the normal routine of her daily life. Even at the dinning table, she was not adorned. She wished to fulfill the desires of her life now. She made arrangements in the kitchen so that she can read at night without disturbing Vyomesh. Kamal and Sunila kept on inquiring whether this will be ok for Vyomesh but Vasudha didn't care for it. She even allowed to keep Salina with them without the consent of Vyomesh. She was ready for a new life, a big step in her life, which she called as Retirement.

Vasudha did not want to be ideal woman. She wanted to be real, a real woman. This desire of hers has given birth to all the problems. Her husband did not support her. Probably this was the reason for her beginning in the Anandgram. She suffers by her husband who gave the promise to support her via marriage, the title of the novel. The seven steps are the seven promises that the marrying couple gives to each other so as to support each other throughout the life in any situation. But Vyomesh had a different view of life, as shown



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by Faiba and other oppressed females of the society. Marriage for Vasudha was like making her an ideal woman not real woman. The decision to leave her husband and stay in Anandagram proves her identity as a real woman. For the entire life she suffered like mother earth to keep her promises of the seven steps, the words literal meaning the starting of a new life after marriage. The contextual meaning refers to the steps taken in imagination so as to reach the ideal or desired situation of life.

Concluding Comments:

To conclude, I find Vasudha as a new woman not only in the Gujarati novel but in the entire Indian literature. Kundanika Kapadia forged the way for other feminist to treat the issue in such emancipator manner. Vasudha, then, as a new woman is alike Nora of Henrik Ibsen's play A Doll's House. Both heroines take decision to leave the comfort of their home for establishing their identity. Vasudha passes "through different concepts, phases and influences", as noted by Anila Dalal. As Anila Dalal sees in Gujarati fiction, Vasudha is "a Gujarati Indian Woman who is modern ... a woman who glorifies woman's independence and identity ... a woman who protests against male-dominated society" (Dalal). The clutches of marriage held them in the chains of household, husband and children. But they were able to break off the chains and become a liberated woman. Marriage has been considered as the promise of happiness and freedom in life but the novel of Kundanika Kapadia portrays it in contradictory manner.



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