



## Reclaiming Female Identities: Kundanika Kapadia's "Seven Steps in the Sky"

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### Abstract

Discourse on the self and identity is central to contemporary feminist theory. Contemporary modern Indian literature is dominated by the writings of women who share their lived and imagined experiences in their works. Their works are dominated by the influence of patriarchy on their lives and the necessity to oppose the male domination and the social conditioning of women. Indian women writers such as Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Das, Mahasweta Devi, Kundanika Kapadia, etc. reject the traditional portrayal of women as enduring and sacrificial victims. Instead, they have moulded bold and assertive female characters who constantly strive to establish their individual identity. Kundanika Kapadia is one such author who offered Gujarati literature female characters of substance who had the courage to question the patriarchal ideology and proclaim their identity amidst social and cultural conditioning. Her best-known novel *Seven Steps In the Sky* (originally published as *Sat Paglan Akashma*) introduces Vasudha as the Subject, who moves out of her marital relationship after thirty-two years of servitude and exploitation. This paper attempts to explore her struggle for freedom and identity in a patriarchal society through female bonding and support.

**Keywords:** Self, other, identity, social conditioning, female bonding, freedom

Identity is a term used to refer to the thoughts, feelings, emotions, dreams, and desires of an individual. It is made evident using dressing style, socially acceptable behaviour, the concept of space and the language used. The identity of an individual is influenced by several factors including the environment, social reinforcement, and cultural influences, etc. The binary of Self/Other is at the centre of the theory of identity. We achieve a sense of identity by distinguishing between the ideas of similarity and difference. Zygmunt Bauman states that societies establish identity categories on the notion of Otherness:

*“Woman is the other of man, animal is the other of human, stranger is the other of native, abnormality the other of norm, deviation the other of law-abiding, illness the other of health, insanity the other of reason, lay public the other of the expert, foreigner the other of state subject, enemy the other of friend.”* (Bauman 1991: 8).

Thus, the identity of an individual is formed by the social construction of these binaries. The notions of majority and minority identities and the notions of superiority and inferiority are influenced by are rooted in the institutions of religion, law, education, etc. Our ideas about what it means to be a man or woman is, hence, socially constructed. According to Simone de Beauvoir: “A woman is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her, she is the incidental and the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute – she is the ‘Other’.” (Beauvoir 1989: xxii)

Although woman’s selfhood has not been denied, she has been relegated to the position of the ‘Other’. She has been systematically subordinated by the culture, the tradition, the customs, the society in which she lives, which determines her identity. This process of social conditioning begins from childhood. According to Kate Millet, gender is “*the sum total of the parents’, the peers’, and the culture’s notions of what is appropriate to each gender by way of temperament, character, interests, status, worth, gesture and expression.*” (Millet 1971: 31). Indian women writers such as Mahasweta Devi, Shashi Deshpande, Amrita Pritam, Kamala Das, Kundanika Kapadia, etc. occupy a distinguished place in Indian literature. As Dhawan has put it, “*Women writers in India are moving forward with their strong and sure strides matching the pace of the world*” (Dhawan 1993: 65). They have adopted a feminist approach in their writings and explored the issues such as identity crisis, female bonding, gender equality, etc.

Women writers in Gujarati feminist literature such as Kundanika Kapadia, Saroj Pathak and Dhiruben Patel have explored themes of women’s status, gender discrimination, and female identity through their works. The women in their works belong to middle-class educated families who struggle to survive in the traditional patriarchal households. They strive to create their Self and situate their identities in a patriarchal society as a daughter, wife, mother – a Woman. Kundanika Kapadia occupies a special position amongst the Gujarati women writers. She is a journalist, novelist, short story writer, essayist and translator. Her major works include “*Parodh Thata Pahela*” (1968), “*Agnipipasa*” (1972), “*Sat Paglan Akashma*” (1984), collections of short stories – “*Premna Ansu*” (1954), “*Vadhu ne Vadhu Sundar*” (1968), “*Kagalni Hodi*” (1978), “*Java Daishu Tamane*” (1983), and “*Manushya Thavu*” (1990) – and collections of essays viz. “*Dwarane Deewal*” (1987) and “*Chandra Tara Vriksh Vadai*” (1988) and several translations from English, Hindi and Bengali. Kapadia is a staunch feminist who poses several unsettling and provocative questions regarding the status of women in Indian society.

The novel “*Sat Paglan Akashma*” (translated in English as “*Seven Steps in the Sky*” by Kunjbala and William Anthony) won her the Sahitya Akademi Award. It depicts the victimization and exploitation of women by patriarchal forces. In the introduction to her novel, Kapadia effectively expresses women’s innermost thoughts and feelings pointing an accusing finger at male domination in a patriarchal family and society. However, the women in the novel overcome men’s violence towards them, alienation, helplessness and discrimination through female bonding and a community based on the principles of love and equality for both the sexes. Through her unforgettable characters – Vasudha, Ana, Alop, Sumitra, Lalita, Ranjana, Vasanti, etc, Kapadia weaves a web of stories questioning inequality, discrimination, subordination, and domestic violence.

The title “*Sat Paglan Akashman*” (“*Seven Steps in the Sky*”) refers to the Hindu marriage ceremony, ‘*saptpadi*’ that signifies an eternal relationship between husband and wife. Sky becomes the ultimate symbol of freedom and emancipation as “*it has no boundaries, nor does it put pressure on others, it does not obstruct anyone, gives space to fly, gives life and beauty*” (256). In her preface, Kapadia states that “*there is an inherent instinct in the human soul to seek freedom and it will not rest until it has achieved it.*” (Kapadia 1994: VI)

The novel centres around Vasudha, who after thirty-two years of her marriage to Vyomesh, walks out of the servitude and domination of a suffocating relationship. At the onset, Vasudha raises an alarming question:

“*Can one live the way one wants to, especially if one is a woman?*” (Kapadia 1994: 1)

This enquiry into the freedom and space allotted to women disturbs all the members of Anandgram, a utopian community formed on the basis of love, care, respect and equality for both the sexes. Vasudha tries to live as an ideal housewife – taking care of her husband, children, home, relations, social dealings and fulfilling others’ expectations – at the cost of her self-respect and esteem, her dreams and aspirations, her love, her identity. Vasudha, who secretly loves Aditya, is given in marriage to Vyomesh without her consent. Vyomesh dominates every part of her existence and crushes her sense of self on a regular basis. To add to her woes, Vyomesh’s maternal aunt, Faiba, oppresses her and dictates her in all the household chores. So much so, that Vasudha is prohibited from standing in the balcony, reading books, going for evening walks, as also visiting her mother who is on her death-bed. Vasudha contemplates:

*“A daughter is always told to win the heart of her husband’s family by love and service. Why doesn’t anyone tell the husband, the mother-in-law, the sister-in-law, to make the new bride’s life easier, happier?”* (Kapadia 1994: 11)

Vyomesh and Faiba govern her body, soul, and her existence. Vasudha describes herself as *“a bird in a golden cage. It’s not hungry or thirsty, it says what it is taught, doesn’t say what it is not to say. And the sad thing is, 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 1994: 19)

Vasudha feels imprisoned in a relationship bereft of love, affection and companionship. She identifies her powerlessness at several stages during the course of the novel. Vasudha is prohibited from sheltering Sumitra, a girl she meets in the park, when her parents are trying to force her into an arranged marriage. On another occasion, she desires to help a neighbour, Ranjana with some loan for the abortion of her daughter, Asha. Vyomesh not only refuses to give the money but humiliates, ridicules and admonishes her for being so thoughtless. However, the final blow comes with his indifference towards the news about the death of Faiba, who had raised him like a mother. Vasudha determines that she can no longer live with such an insensitive man under the same roof. Vasudha’s interactions with Leena, Urmila, Nalini, Lata, Lalita and Vasanti revealed the plethora of stories about subservience, discrimination, unequal property rights, the double burden of working women, domestic violence, extra-marital affairs, and the stifling of their creative genius: *“Women have had a low status for centuries. They have been victims of injustice and violence, their intelligence and talents made subsidiary to beauty and appearance; they have been made prisoners under the guise of ‘protection’, and to make them accept all this without rebelling, they have been given false ideals. They have been told that to be epitomes of endurance and sacrifice is the realization of their womanhood, that not maintaining a separate identity but submerging it into their husband’s is their ultimate goal.”* (Kapadia 1994: 26)

Vasudha’s bonding with these women helps her to endure, and at the same time, resist these injustices to women. Lalita and Vasanti, both, wish to persevere their passion for literature and music respectively. But their aspirations shatter to pieces after marriage when most of their time is consumed by household routines. They become victims to physical abuse and extra-marital affairs of their husbands. They yearn for some space and time for themselves in their abusive relationships. Vasudha infuriates at the pitiable state of women around her. She exclaims:

*“I’ve got to do something about these things...Alone, I’m powerless; but we women can do something if we get together.”* (Kapadia 1994: 102)

Communal sisterhood and female bonding serve as a means to uplift these women and empower them to establish their individual identities. After thirty-two years of her marriage, Vasudha asserts her identity by declaring that she wants to retire from her work as a housewife. Vyomesh infuriates and lashes out at her demanding a separation. When her children object, Vasudha exclaims:

*“Isn’t it possible that by freeing him I can become free myself?”* (Kapadia 1994: 225)

Vasudha leaves home and visits her cousin, Vinod, who introduces her to the community of people at Anandgram. It was a community based on the principles of equal work and equal opportunity for all. Kapadia uses the metaphor of a plant to describe the change in Vasudha’s personality at Anandgram:

*“The plant which had somehow survived by its own strength in the parched earth, had now been lifted by unseen hands and planted in fertile soil, and waited to burst forth into new leaves.”* (Kapadia 1994: 228)

Vasudha meets Sumitra and Aditya at Anandgram. She starts with helping Sumitra with weaving rugs and later takes charge of Agnivesh’s bakery. Not only does she attain financial independence but also emotional healing through caring for Jaya when she is ill – *“it helped heal the regrets she had about not being able to care for her own mother.”* (Kapadia 1994: 234)

When Salina brings the news about Ratna’s rape by a minister’s son, Vasudha plans a protest march exclusively by women:

*“This crusade was against the destruction of women’s individuality, which was happening everywhere – in the house, in the workplace, in society.”* (Kapadia 1994: 249)

Multitudes of women turn up for the protest march and force the rapist to apologize in public. Vasudha gets immense satisfaction in fighting for the rights of women. All her frustration and dissatisfaction with herself evaporates and she glows with happiness, and goes on to explain that *“I wasn’t looking for happiness, I was searching for the right to be myself.”* (Kapadia 1994: 261)

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