

Gandhian Ideology For Resistance in the Seven Steps in the Sky

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Abstract : Gandhian influence has barely left any field unaffected in independent India. Kundanika Kapadia's National Sahitya Academy Award winning 1984 novel *Seven Steps in the Sky* is no exception to it. An epitome of feminism in Gujarati fiction, the novel is a polyphonic display of several feminist voices craving for a social change. How come a social change in India be uninfluenced by Gandhian ways? Suffocated by patriarchal social set up, a group of women decides to voice against an incident of criminal oppression by a politically powerful man. They chose a Gandhian way to protest, a decision scarcely been taken by women. Their protest unearths a different, hidden version of women. Not only Gujarati fiction but Gujarati society, even Indian society at large, came across the manly instincts of womanhood by the novel. Present paper is an endeavor to analyze the image of new woman defined via medium of Gandhi-paved way, the image that sustained lasting effects on Gujarati literary scenario and society at large.

IndexTerms - Feminism, Womanhood, Seven Steps in the Sky, Gujarati feminism, Feminist fiction, Non Violent Resistance, Gandhian Weapon, Resistance, Kundnika Kapadia

India's struggle for independence and post-independence Indian society is no exception in dominant prevalence of manly valor in revolutionary changes in society. Among many influential personalities who affected the mass at large in India, Gandhiji is the person who paved his own ways to resist and respond. His remarkable, revolutionary ways of living, has affected the society not only in his own time but decades after his departure. Literature in India at regional, national and international fronts recognized and acknowledged his remarkable influence to the society that invited social revolutions and empowerment. Gujarati literati community also got influenced by Gandhian ideologies. Kundanika Kapadia's *Seven Steps in the Sky* came up with strong influence of Gandhian ideology. Emanating feminist values, the novel put Kundnika Kanpadia and her feminist approach to the lime light. The novel fetched her the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award in 1985. *Seven Steps in the Sky* become epitome of feminism in Gujarati fiction.

Feminism in India, unlike the west, deals with the fundamental issues related to the upliftment of women. It begins with social reformation for the welfare of the oppressed, illiterate and enslaved women. Gandhi encouraged women empowerment by supporting and encouraging women to step out of the four walls and participate in the freedom struggle. That encouragement strengthened the idea of lauding the voices against unjust and oppressive patriarchal social set up. Literary history gives testimonial account of Indian women finding a way to loud their oppressed voices through fictional works. In the absence of eye-catching development of Feminism in India, Women did crave for their space, due importance and respectable position but did not loud these concerns to a scale which can bring significant changes. This craving is evident in the fictional works in various languages of India. Consequences of such constant craving reached new heights in Kundanika Kapadia's Sahitya Academy Award winning novel *Seven Steps in the Sky*.

Published originally in Gujarati in 1984, *Seven Steps in the Sky* is documentary novel of modern women's retaliation. It inspired change in values, and encouraged the women to take up new revolutionary ideas to loud their voices against patriarchal social set up. Set in 1980s, the novel is polyphonic account of several oppressed women souls. Narrated by Isha in first person narration, the novel revolves round the protagonist Vasudha and a few other women characters' life. The Gandhian effect in Kapadia's writing, particularly in this novel can obviously be observed since she participated in Quit India Movement in 1942. Well known Gandhian weapon of civil disobedience and non-violent resistance come to the surface at the end of the novel. Chapter 37th of the novel begins thus:

‘Saina told the following story:

‘Three girls were going home at night a few days ago after seeing a film, when they were attacked by three men. The girls fought back, shouting for help at the same time. Hearing their screams, people came out of surrounding buildings, but in the interval, two of the girls were knocked to the ground, while the third, called Ratna, was dragged off by the gang. She found the next morning, unconscious, near her home. She had been raped, and told to keep away from the police. If she didn’t, her family would be destroyed.’ (Kapadia 238)

It is later known that Rahu, a minister’s son, attacked and gang-raped a girl named Ratna in revenge, the revenge of the slap from Ratna to Rahu in resistance to vile remark to her. Salina, young and energetic leader of a youth group burst into the anger to this incidence. All the villagers become active on this women awakening upheaval in Anandgram, the imagined ideal village-like place in the novel. Salina, outrageously, thinks of doing something to teach Rahu and likewise people a lesson that they will never forget. The parents of the victim agreed to go to the police station finally but it took a lot of persuasion for that. Political reach of the victim and fear of defamation in society shook them all. Kaveri who went to convince Ratna’s parents for actions against the crime received anonymous threat. But rock-solid Salina did not step back and sat up late at night with her group to work out what actions can be taken. This responsive and retaliating self of Salina was new to the society. Fearless Salina displays change in feminine attitude. Avoidance of submission to the crime and society and decision of fighting back is pretty unlikely to ordinary women. Craving for social and legal justice for an oppressed woman, symbolically women at large, drove them all to start a campaign. In an argument by Vasudha that she had not done anything like this, Salina replies, ‘You may not have done anything like this, but you are a revolutionary in your own way.’ (Kapadia 240) This spirit of finding something unique in every individual is Gandhian. Vasudha’s remark ‘We women should unite in the realization that all women in distress are our sisters and it is our duty to stand by them’ (Kapadia 241) scents Gandhian ideology of love and compassion for others. Salina and all the other women in the house now resolve to have a protest march under the leadership of Vasudha.

Nonviolent resistance is the way highlighted by Gandhiji during Indian Freedom Movement. The weapon of Protest march is one of the most powerful and effective ways to fight in Gandhian way. Women in Anandgram adopted Gandhian weapon of protest march to demand the justice and loud voice against patriarchal social set up. To let others know the importance of their existence and dignity of their selves, they decide to have a bit different march, a march consisting only of women. Vasudha floats the idea thus :

‘ ‘We should have a protest march.’ ...

‘No, this will be different. It will only consist only of women. There will be no slogan-chanting, only placards with a picture of Rahu, and a caption underneath, “the criminal must be punished.” The destination of the march should be the minister’s house. ...’ (Kapadia 242-243)

The plan is accepted unanimously in Anandgram and few men also join in, though they will not be in the procession but will walk alongside the leader at a distance. Gandhiji himself encouraged women to rise to their capacities by handing over certain responsibilities in the freedom struggle of India. Women, at that time, were backed by several men. In the novel, this backing up is quite similar to Gandhian spirit. In a meeting called before the march, Salina enlightens and ignites feminism fervor to the women in a speech that is applauded loud and clear. Salina’s speech is actually indirect elaboration of the term Feminism. Her speech reflects Gandhian essence when she talks of raising voice not only for their own selves but also for many others who cannot. Benevolence and compassion shines in her words. Though she may sound outrageous in tone, her words and intentions are to attain the place of honour to the talents of all the women. She did not want a fight against males but against the patriarchal social set up. Salina roars thus:

‘...Until now women have not got together to agitate publically for the rights of women in our country, but today that responsibility has fallen on us. It is not an easy task to challenge the beliefs that have strangled the mass mind for centuries. ... Our movement is for creating a new society in which men and women have equal status and equal rights and equal respect. No one will be inferior or

superior... this fight is not against men, this fight is against injustice... We want to create a new system and run our daily affairs in corporation to them...' (Kapadia 245-247)

Gandhian ideology is more apparent when Salina denounces war and chaos and craves peace, the peace born out of harmony and not out of choking silence. She feels that the foundation of this peace is equality, respect for each other and love. Justice and impartiality for all human beings is all that she desires. It sounds unprecedented when it is found that girls moved through the different areas of the city to spread the word regarding the march.

The march began with a group of women standing silently to the square, without being paid much attention but when they marched ahead, many such groups got together to make the river of women shining in black cloths, bearing placards of Rahu's photo and several slogans. Many women distributed pamphlets to the pedestrians. Some women on the street also joined the march. Women have been passively tolerating injustice against them but this they now woke up and triggered the tornado of change. This tornado was not due to one incident but against the destruction of women's individuality that was being hampered every now-and-then every here-and-there. Gandhi hardly insisted people to join in such protests. It was volunteer decision of an individual to contribute in such protests. Women, voluntarily, left everyday chores to join in this protest march. Earlier, there had been protest marches, but not with such women centric purposes consisting of only women.

When the procession reached its destination, the front demanded to bring the criminal in the public and to make him apologize to Ratna. The silent procession became vociferous with chanting of thousands of women when the police deployed at the minister's house denied further entry and told lies regarding presence of the accused Rahu and his minister father. When Rahu and his father tried to escape, the women shouted in fury. Police lathi-charged the protestors and injured many of them. Mitra, one of the Anandgram members lost her life in the protest. Her gigantic funeral procession consisted of women only and her pyre was lit by women which was actually unconventional. Protest did not stop after the end of the march. All women's strike-an unprecedented event took place. Women sanitary workers, teachers, doctors, nurses, lawyers, judges, nurses, air-hostesses, clerks, typists, receptionists, secretaries, professors, students, housewives, film actresses, ministers - women from every field joined their hands into the protest and went on strike. The momentum later subsided but the protest gave birth to a new era.

The way the protest march carried out was a never-before experience. Women, conventionally thought to be taking care of the household chores choking their oppressed voices, came up to the front to make the society realize their value. From the idea of the march to the end of it, it reflected gandhian way of protesting. Women marchers did not adopt violence at all during the march. Number of marchers joined voluntarily, the gandhian gesture. The march was carried out not against a single incident but against much suppression over women. Alike gandhian ideology, the sense of love and compassion for others is evident in the act of protest march. The consequence of opting for this Gandhian way ultimately is the dawn of a new era where women led the initiative to make others aware about their importance as individuals. Vasudha, the leader almost gets a rebirth that she constantly craved throughout the novel. The society witnessed the power of women. It brought about significant change in the stereotypical mindsets of the patriarchal society.

Seven Steps in the Sky is a groundbreaking work in feminist fiction in India. Though it is condemned by many for excessively leaning towards feminist perspectives and biased plotline, the novel undoubtedly marked radical changes in the behavior of the society towards women. This thought provoking novel became catalyst for acknowledging womanhood with its many dimensions. Womanhood broke the shells and bright lights were thrown upon new image of women after this novel. Gandhian ways of non-violent resistance is used purposefully and effectively in the novel which ultimately redefined women and womanhood. It left lasting effects on Gujarati literary scenario and society at large.

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