

# A Quest of Woman Identity: Deforming, Reforming or Forming Identity A Special Reference to “Seven Steps in the Sky”

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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the very common problem that is: Comparative Cultural Studies: Deforming, reforming or forming identity? As per the cultural concepts, the person is struggling for finding its identity. Here too, the protagonist of the novel is struggling for finding her identity. Identity crisis is a very common in any work of art which reflects the society, represent the specific culture. **“In this world, all are in equal, but the women are more in equal.”** As said in quotation, the novel is based on the woman protagonist. In this world, all are alike but the women are more alike. It is the culture which makes women more alike. The novel “Seven Steps in the Sky” focuses on the tradition, customs, and culture that makes an issue of an identity of the protagonist. It should not be such where one class/ group of the people get an opportunity to be superior to other class / group of society. And if it happens, it seems that it is an insult of human’s pride from the base of him /her. Even in 21<sup>st</sup> century, not only in India, but all over the world, our society is Male dominant society which always raises a question on the independent existence of women in the society. In the preface of the novel, the author gives many illustrations in which it reflects the pitiable condition of women across the world.

**Key words :** Quest of Woman Identity, Deforming, Reforming or Forming Identity

## Introduction:

The cultural studies always talk about the specific culture of the region. The community which belongs to such region always worries about the preservation of their culture. On the other side, in any work of art which reflects the society, represent the specific culture. Thus,

assimilating and integrating the culture give a rise to Multiculturalism. But even

after it, the basic question arises: Is it a preservation or distortion of culture? Indeed, the question is multidimensional. It shows that the aim behind it should be very clear. After all, the literature is to be followed to reform, to destruct or to

preserve? When we look at the literature of 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we find distinct pattern it. It has no more technique, rather talks about different culture of it. There are many cultural interfaces that we have come across with when we study the comparative literature. This paper discusses the very common problem that is: Comparative Cultural Studies: Deforming, reforming or forming identity? As per the cultural concepts, the person is struggling for finding its identity. Here too, the protagonist of the novel is struggling for finding her identity.

**Deforming, reforming or forming identity in the Novel: “Seven Steps in the Sky”**

*“In this world, all are in equal, but the women are more in equal.”*

As said in above quotation, the novel is based on the woman protagonist. In this world, all are alike but the women are more alike. It is the culture which makes women more alike. The novel, Seven Steps in the Sky (originated in Gujarati as ‘SaatPagalaAkashma’ and translated into English) written by a famous lady Gujarati writer KundanikaKapadiya. It was published in July 1982 in the Sunday

Column of Newsletter “JanmabhoomiPravasi” for 40 weeks. At the time of release, the novel had received both kinds of feedback. On one side, some readers praised a lot as they said it is an excellent work of art they have ever read before and it should be honoured by Nobel Prize, and on the another, badly criticized by saying that the author should be sent to jail. This seems that it is probably the mindsets of all humans, make a predicament on it. The question may arise that why there could be fierce contradictory the humans make for the same work of art? Probably, as I opine, that is because of the tradition, cultural background or customs that a specific society form. After all, who forms the identity of self? The culture, the tradition, the society in which you stay or your own self who every time in dilemma about your own identity.

The novel focuses on the tradition, customs, and culture that makes an issue of an identity of the protagonist. It should not be such where one class/ group of the people get an opportunity to be superior to other class / group of society. And if it happens, it seems that it is an insult of human’s pride from the base of

him /her. Even in 21<sup>st</sup> century, not only in India, but all over the world, our society is Male dominant society which always raises a question on the independent existence of women in the society. In the preface of the novel, the author gives many illustrations in which it reflects the pitiable condition of women across the world.

### **The Theme:**

The novel opens with the description of beautiful landscape of the 'home' named "FOOLGHAR" in which the main protagonist of the novel – Vasudha stays with some other persons includes both – the male and female. It is named as Foolghar as it contains various flowers, green garden and beautiful seashore. Probably, it may be used as a symbol by which the author suggests that a group of people stays together, despite of belonging to different culture and community, blossoms every time and never leave fragrance. In the very beginning, when the people of foolghar are gathered for evening tea, Vasudha puts a voice in front of all. The voice hit as if the thunder strikes and it was: "Can man live his life according to his own wishes?" And then she added, "Especially

women?" By the time, Ana, Alopa, Vinod, Mitra replied but no one could convince Vasudha. She also raises one more question, "What, according to you, is the definition of Happiness for women?" It was really a challenge for all of them as unexpected question was raised by Vasudha. The whole story, later on focuses on the struggling life of a lower middle class woman who gets married to a boy, belongs to upper middle class family.

The theme is built up on the issues that a woman faces plenty problems in her own life but still it questions on her own identity as a human. Vasudha was born in lower middle class family who is fond of reading and of enjoying natural beauty and hence, as a girl, many a times, she visits her terrace of the home to enjoy the glory of evening. She loves to talk with clouds and nature. One of the persons, Aditya, visits his home, she likes his chat as she feels similar kind of ideas that they share. One day, Vyomesh- a man belongs to upper middle class family, visits vasudha's home to see her. He likes her and decides to get married with her. Vasudha's parents become very much happy as they feel that there will

be no problem to arrange marriage for the rest of the two girls and they will be happy at their home. The typical tradition & custom of the society, here pauses a number of questions for all of us. Such as, why you consider a woman (or a gal) as if they are the commodities for selling? Why the society is in hurry to arrange the marriage at a very early age? Whether they want to get rid of their responsibilities or they want to escape from their duties? Why does the society prevent girls to take higher education? It seems that perhaps, the society has no answer for explanation. Thus, throughout the story, it raises a number of questions in front of the readers.

### **Deforming Identity:**

Deforming identity means that the protagonist is losing his/her own identity. As we all know, human is helpless in establishing his own identity. And women, even during post independence era in India, are still struggling for finding their identity. Likewise, here too, Vasudha, when she gets married, and arrives at her husband's home, every moment she feels that there is no importance of his own essence. On the

contrary, his husband Vyomesh, is trying to form his own identity. In every inch, Vasudha fails to establish her own identity. There are only three members in the family but because of some traditions, customs and cultural beliefs, Vasudha fails to establish it. For Instance, whenever Vasudha sits for reading books, Vyomesh and his aunt both try to keep away Vasudha from reading. At the same time, despite of hectic schedule in the morning session and in evening, Vyomesh, a male, sits for reading newspaper, no one has objection if he does so.

Identity?????!!!!

There are number of incidents which again raises plenty questions which are unanswered. For Instance, Why is it always the daughter-in-law's duty to please all others around her? Why don't the in-laws often think that a little innocent girl has left everything - her home, the love of parents and brothers and sisters, friends she's known since childhood, the free laughter and games? And hence they should really look after her, take care of her hopes and dreams! A daughter is always told to win the hearts

of her husband's family by love and service. Why doesn't anyone normally tell the husband, the mother-in-law, the sister-in-law, to make the new bride's life easier, happier? Men always do what they please. A woman, especially a new bride, must forget her own wishes, and then gradually that becomes a habit.

Why is the daughter-in-law often expected never to get tired? Do they think that once a woman becomes a daughter-in-law, she is an unlimited source of energy?

Why do women get married? Girls study and wait for a proposal, and then get married. Right from the first breath, they are told that marriage is the ultimate aim of their lives. If that aim is not achieved, or not accomplished in good time, the girl becomes depressed, and her life loses its direction. Every effort is made to regain that direction; standards are dropped, and what was once barely an acceptable prospect becomes acceptable and it feels like an end to all the trouble. She agrees to observe every kind of traditional restriction. She must cover her head all the time, she cannot go out to work, and there must be a certain amount of

jewelry in the dowry. Every condition is accepted so as not to lose the chance of marriage. If it's lost, the daughters become a burden to the parents. Why? What do the women get out of marriage? Do they get Love, a roof or Protection?

Women want love but what they get is mostly desire in the garb of love, not love itself. In novel, many times we see that Vasudha doesn't like accompany of her husband when he is making love with her. But she couldn't utter a single word in opposition to it as it's part of the tradition where women can not utter a single word in against of the man.

Women want a roof. Does the house become theirs? If a man is angry, he says - 'Leave my house right now.' If he is pleased, he says - 'You brighten my house.' It is always the man's house. The woman only brightens it. This is all that is expected of her - to look after the man's house. In novel, we find that Vasudha wants to help her friend when she is need of money and when Vasudha demands for her, Vyomesh denies to help her. More so, once she allows Sumitra, her another friend to stay with her and

the moment Vyomesh knows that she has left her own home, even Vasudha disagrees, her husband and aunt don't even ask her once what Vasudha wants and kick her out of home.

Women want protection. For that protection is a solid wall erected around them. The wall has no windows to look out at the sky. The various women in the novel including Vasudha have no permission to move out of the home.

A husband's death is a terrible blow to the wife. But, often it appears that a husband isn't greatly inconvenienced by the loss of his wife. That is because women's lives and emotions are valued less. And that is proved by the fact that a man can remarry immediately after his wife's death. Men often remarry quickly, even before their wives' pyres are cold. It isn't often possible for a widow to remarry, even for the sake of her children.

If a widow's only son dies, it is considered to be the height of tragedy, but if a widow's only daughter marries and goes away, that's a great relief. Isn't it strange?

Most women, who marry, forget their

identity and live in submission to the unwritten code of their in-law's house. Their talents are developed only within permitted limits. Everything else is sacrificed to the goddess named 'peace'.

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.

Why is it set that the daughter-in-law can go to her parents' home only at a certain time during pregnancy? Why is the permission from in-laws needed to go to parents' home especially in the initial months of marriage?

All their life, children carry their father's name with theirs. There is no mention of mother in the family tree. Her mind and body were worn out with the endless

chores of bringing them up, but she will die leaving no name, dissolve without leaving any trace. Why? If there were only daughters to a father, there would be no branches from his name, as if he had no children, as if he had never become a father. Why?

Men can do most kinds of work, can survive somehow. But women have some biological limitations, and to make up for this, they must develop their talents, otherwise they cannot realize their full potential. So, shouldn't women be at least as much educated as men, or better?

Why can't a daughter look after her parents if she is earning? If a daughter really wants to care for her parents, she should stay unmarried because if she does marry, she often loses the right to be of service to them. That obligation belongs to the son. After marriage, a son can take care of his parents, and ask his wife to do the same.

The same holds true when someone wants to pursue something which requires a lot of dedication. If a woman wants to be in a field which requires a lot of dedication to work, she is supposed to stay unmarried as she might not otherwise do justice to her 'household

duties'. But, if a man wants to pursue such a field, he would rather be advised to get married so that his wife takes care of the household duties and he can pursue his interests/job better.

When a husband's relations, close or distant, come to visit, stay for a meal, they all should be offered enthusiastic hospitality by the wife. Not many of the wife's relations come visiting. The husband will pay attention to them only if it pleases him, but if he is not in the mood, he will ignore them. He and his mother aren't often too pleased if the wife shows too much affection for her kin.

Kitchen - is the woman's world. Their unhappiness stays hidden in the dark corners of the kitchen. Nobody sees it; the other rooms in the house are lighted and airy, but the kitchen, where women spend most of their time, is small and gloomy. Occasionally, the lights have to be switched on even in the day. There is no place to sit. There are fans in other rooms but often not in the kitchen, which is hot.

A woman may work outside as hard as her husband, but it is always she who serves him the meals. Why don't we ever

see the reverse? There are no words like 'barren man' or 'deserted husband' in the dictionary unlike their feminine equivalents. Is it because the right to 'desert' is a man's right only?

Does wearing or not wearing bangles and applying or not applying a bindi makes a woman a worse or a better person? Does a society or a culture survive through its external rules, customs and conducts, or by its morality? All these questions may prove that the womanhood is losing its own identity.

### **Reforming Identity:**

On the contrary, when one is incapable of doing so, there will be time, when she will try to reform i.e., will quest for her identity. How far one can tolerate such matters which cannot be adjusted / compromised with own thinking? In the novel, for instance, Sumitra, when her parents forcibly asks her to get married with a boy who like them, she leaves her home and arrives at Vasudha's home. Similarly, Ena, Lopa, Esha, Vinod etc. are the characters in the novel who try to reform their identity rebelling against cultural constructs. Likewise, Vasudha too, when she realizes that it crosses the boundary and gradually, starts speaking

in against of her husband and aunt as well and tries to get back her identity as a woman. She was having fear all the time when he was a part of male dominant society but later on, while she moves in the restaurant with her friend and arrives lately, she is gradually receiving her essence. Thus, it is a journey towards reforming identity. Aditya, Lalita, Sumitra all are the other characters who are trying to search for their identity.

### **Forming Identity:**

After discussing, deforming & reforming the identity, we can talk of forming identity. As narrated in this novel, the question arises here what could be the reason behind such issues which are always experienced in the society. Probably, there are two reasons for it: a) Every woman, when becomes a law, start harassing the bride, because of the fear of possession that she has with her son. And b) The Sanskara of Maun (Dumbness). Whatsoever, the problems occur, they tolerate without uttering a single word. For instance, one incident is narrated in this novel, when in educated family, a woman is hit by her husband. At a time,

we can think of that why they still live with such savage man? Perhaps, they are abide by the Sanskara they have inherited from their parents. In novel, Vyomesh is characterized as Male Dominant psyche where as, aunty (Faiba) is the blind worshiper of social economic conventions of the culture.

Towards an end, when Vasudha realizes about her injustices, she awakes, she found her own similar identity in other women of the society too and she feels that she is crushed , suppressed by the manhood. It leads her to a great conflict in her mind. And then, she moves on the path of freedom. She is determined to establish her own identity. When ever an exploited society, struggles thus, she passes through such critical circumstances only. Many of the readers questions at the step taken by Vasudha in the novel and identify as an escape. But escape means, to be incapable of doing something and then recede. Vasudha is not like that. She is not a defeated but a subjugator. Her one family is broken (for that, Vasudha is not responsible) but on the other side, she incarnate a large family and that is her achievement. Thus,

towards an end Vasudha forms her identity and helps other characters also in forming their identity as Humans, especially woman hood.

### **Conclusion:**

During the reading of whole novel, we feel that sometimes, the women are the enemies of the other women. That's why they are crushed by the man in male dominant society. More so, the men have fear that if they are not mightier, then women will be far ahead of them. Such fear make them stubborn and behave savagely with women. There is always a struggle for equality between man & woman. The biggest weakness of human is its restrictions and blind superstitions and improper conventions of the society. The women have to search their identity through their self-respect, their own efforts, vision and regain their aims in life. Such women can induce welfare to the society, nation and the world. For that, of course, we have to come out from our old traditions and beliefs about our religion, family, traditions, customs, etc.

Every race has pride for its own culture. If you afraid of such changes, then can

never make progress. The time has changed. Both – man and woman are imperfect. They have vices and virtues as well. When both of them will realize and will come out from such prejudices, and will accompany to each other the success will be knocking at your door!!!!

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*Believe in yourself! Have faith in your abilities!  
Without a humble but reasonable confidence in your  
own powers you cannot be successful or happy.  
~ Norman Vincent Peale*