

**A Two-dimensional Comparative Analysis of the Adaptation and English
Rendering of a Famous Gujarati Novel *Saat Pagla Aakashma***

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Abstract:

This paper intends to commence a two dimensional comparative study of a Sahitya Akademy Award winning Gujarati novel *Saat Pagla Akashma* by Kundanika Kapadia – the first dimension includes its thematic and character depiction resemblance with a famous landmark feminist novel of America *The Women's Room* by Marilyn French and the second dimension is examining the English rendering of the text by Kunjabala and William Anthony from linguistic, cultural and gender perspectives. Both the writers – Kapadia and French represent radical feminist views through their women characters who were able to fight against the oppressive patriarchy and emerge as strong personalities. The paper tries to establish the multiple common traits of the two texts and claim that Kapadia has adapted not just the feminist views of French but has Indianized them in her novel. On the other hand, the English translation of this famous text falls short at many levels to recreate the brilliant artistic impact and strong feminist appeal of the original and ends up being a meagre replica. The paper tries to figure out the possible reasons for the same by closely examining the hermeneutics of the translation process.

Key words: comparative analysis, translation studies, feminism, gender perspectives, adaptation

Introduction

This paper proposes to initiate a two dimensional comparative study of the pioneering feminist novel of Gujarat *Saat Pagla Aakashma* (1984) by a Sahitya Akademy Award winning author Kundanika Kapadia (1927-2020) – the first dimension incorporates its thematic and character resemblance with the landmark American feminist novel *The Women's Room* (1977) by Marilyn French (1929-2009) and the second dimension is to compare the original Gujarati novel with its English rewriting – *Seven Steps in the Sky* (1994) by Kunjabala (1936) and William Anthony (1932-2017) from linguistic, cultural and gender perspectives. The paper intends to establish the multiple common traits of the two original

texts and humbly claims that Kapadia has not just adapted the thematic aspects as well as the feminist view points of French but has also Indianized them for easy acceptance by the Indian readers. On the other hand, the English translation of this famous text falls short to meet the linguistic, semantic and aesthetic standards of the original text and ends up being a meagre replica of this critically acclaimed novel. This paper tries to comprehend the probable reasons for the same by closely examining the hermeneutics of the translation process and the translators' view points.

Readers' Response To Both The Novels

The Women's Room has been described as one of the most influential novels of the modern feminist movement in America selling over 20 million copies and was translated into 20 languages and was also made into a movie. It became the *New York Times* bestseller the same year it got published and gained international fame. In the same line, *Saat Pagla Aakashma* gained instant popularity and Kapadia was hailed as a great writer for her spirit to advocate women's rights explicitly by a number of women readers suffering subjugation. Majority of women readers found these novels relatable as they found their lives and struggles being replicated through the lives and problems of the protagonists and other women portrayed in the novels. In words of Satupa Chaudhuri, "...seemingly oscillating between the individual urge for self-fulfilment and the social demands made on women for self-sacrifice, these women writers create characters that, when driven to the wall, make bold choices for the survival of their core being... Believing that a change in the condition of women must begin with a change in their own consciousness, the...women writers portray women as gradually coming to realize their own oppression in their short stories and novels." (180)

On the other hand, both the novels received much negative criticism for provoking women and both the writers were alleged to be 'anti-men'. Both French and Kapadia have repetitively explored the theme of the exploitation of women at the hands of patriarchy and their approach often uncompromising, their manners intrepid and their confidence unshakable – all these factors might be responsible for these accusations. Their portrayals of powerful women characters and the lack of any dynamic male characters is a major reason that is mainly responsible for negative criticism.

Thematic Similarities

The titles of both the novels hint at the most cherished desire of women – freedom. The 'sky' in *Saat Pagla Aakashma* symbolizes freedom while having one's own room implicates sense of independence. Both the novels propagate feminist ideology, particularly the Second Wave of Feminism of the 1960s, in a radical manner and the central female characters namely – Vasudha and Mira respectively become the vehicle to carry forward these views. We can notice multiple similarities in the thematic aspects of both the novels listed as below:

Submissiveness:

The two novels under scrutiny trace the theme of the life journeys of submissive housewives – Mira in *The Women's Room* and Vasudha in *Saat Pagla Aakashma* – towards self-discovery. Both Mira Ward and Vasudha belong to middle-class families having high moral values, both are educated with analytical skills, both are ardent readers, and both marry out of some pressure, in case of Mira it is her fear of being hounded by men that encourages her to marry Norm, a medical student and Vasudha marries Vyomesh, a boy from a well-to-do family, out of a social and family pressure. Mira, who is an under graduate student, decides to drop out of college and takes up odd jobs to support her husband to pursue his medical degree while Vasudha shifts to Mumbai from a small village and takes up the household responsibilities to support her husband and in-laws. Mira and Norm have two sons later on while Vasudha gives birth to three sons. Mira used to spend her days under the dominance of her parents and later Norm before and after her marriage respectively. Vasudha also meekly submits to the exploitative authorities of her husband and in-laws without raising any questions for the sake of family harmony. Both the women are well-aware of their subjugation but somehow they are afraid to voice their concerns openly and thus suffer deep down. Kate Millet has aptly expressed her views regarding the male dominance in society as follows, "What goes largely unexamined, often even unacknowledged...in our social order, is the birthright priority whereby males rule females. Through this system a most ingenious form of "interior colonization" has been achieved. It is one which tends moreover to be sturdier than any form of segregation, and more rigorous than class stratification, more uniform, certainly more enduring." (25)

Finding solace through shared experiences of subjugation:

During the course of their lives, Mira and Vasudha come in contact with a few women of their neighbourhood (in case of Mira – Adele, Natalie, Bliss, Margaret, Amelia and later Val, Kyla, Clarissa, Isolde, Samantha, Lily, Martha etc. when she shifts to another city; and for Vasudha – Vasanti, Latita, Ranjana, Sumitra initially and later Anna, Isha, Bela, Alopa, Mitra (Sumitra) etc. at Anandgram) who are united in marriage, motherhood as well as their common experiences of oppression and find consolation and emotional support in the company of these women. As Raghuvir Chaudhari and Radheshyam Sharma have correctly observed, "...because of their position in the patriarchal order women share a common experience of oppression that could become the basis for solidarity. The process of consciousness raising brought women together to talk about their experiences, and through mutual sharing, they came to understand that what they thought were merely personal problems were actually politically over-determined. Consciousness-raising asked women to examine how their own lived experiences contradicted the dominant ideology and to recognize the ways in which internalized societal norms keep them complicit in their own oppression." (357)

Disharmonious marriage:

After many years of enjoying marital bliss, Mira and Vasudha face issues in their marriage, their husbands Norm and Vyomesh respectively demand divorce due to their affairs with another women and Norm remarries immediately after the divorce while

Vyomesh decides to wait for a while before deciding upon the next course of action. Both the protagonists are shattered emotionally after this incident and they decide to take up some extreme steps – a failed suicide attempt in case of Mira and a decision to abandon her house for Vasudha. Although these experiences are dreadful, they are like blessings in disguise as they open up unforeseen opportunities for both – Mira joins Harvard University to complete her studies and pursue career in academics. Vasudha, on the other hand, shifts to Anandgram, an ideal settlement where like-minded people can enjoy harmonious co-existence.

Journey towards self-discovery and attainment of life-goals:

Mira and Vasudha come in contact with several radical women at Harvard and Anandgram respectively, and they discover their strength of character by openly expressing their opinions and discontentment about the condition of women in society. As Mira meets strong minded women like Val, Kyla, Clarissa, Isolde who influence her in changing her perceptions, Vasudha meets Anna, Jayaben, Alope, Bela who help her realize her abilities and her consciousness blossoms. Both Mira and Vasudha get involved into similar circumstances which become a turning point in their lives. Mira's friend Val's daughter Christine becomes victim of gang rape and Mira along with other women fight for her justice while Vasudha and the inmates of Anandgram actively participate in a protest against the rape of a poor girl by the son of a Minister. Later Mira starts a romantic relationship with Ben only to end up in break up when Ben expects her to move with him to Africa to become a housewife. On the other hand, Vasudha reunites with Aditya, whom she used to adore during her adulthood, and decides to move to the Himalayas with him to work for the welfare of the women of the tribal communities. Both the novels end with a note of hope for women to attain freedom and life goals for more fulfilling lives.

Escapist mentality:

Both the protagonists exhibit escapist mentality quite often during the course of these novels. Although Mira and Vasudha are well-aware of the discriminating social system, they hardly raise their voice with an excuse of preserving family harmony. They prefer to play their victim card by blaming men and the patriarchy while being complete blindfold towards the fact that even men can be victims of patriarchal system which imbibes certain value system in them that encourages them to think or act in certain ways.

Later, when both the protagonists come at a crossroads in their lives namely Norm and Vyomesh's affairs, and they are forced to take decisions, they end up in taking extreme steps – of attempting suicide and later getting divorce in case of Mira while Vasudha abandons her family to take refuge in Anandgram. They are stubborn in their attitude towards men and their rigidity is a matter of pride while their husbands' behaviour is considered selfish and ego-driven. As Adrienne Rich puts it, "Is there a connection between this state of mind – the Cold War mentality, the attribution of all our problems to an external enemy – and a form of feminism so focused on male evil and female victimization that it, too, allows for no differences among women, men, places, times, cultures, conditions, classes, movements" (221)?

Similarity in the traits of Female Characters**Vasanti-Martha:**

Vasanti, Vasudha's neighbour shares similar line of emotional traumas with Martha from *The Women's Room* who desires to join law school to become a successful lawyer but instead of support, she is ridiculed by her husband. She struggles to keep their lives together only to realizing that the couple is heading quickly towards divorce. She suffers nervous breakdowns and even attempts suicide but is timely saved by Mira. Vasanti in *Saat Pagla Aakashma* has a melodious voice and is very fond of singing. But her husband Satish, an established music critic, although appreciates her talent, expects her to focus on her household duties only. One day Vasanti realizes her long lost desire to be a trained classical singer and starts her training in classical music, going against her husband's wish which results into Satish's detachment, his affair with a famous female singer and later his failure to extend any emotional support when Vasanti is detected with breast cancer. She feels completely heartbroken leading her towards depression.

Bela-Clarissa:

Another character resemblance can be found between Clarissa from *The Women's Room* and Bela in *Saat Pagla Aakashma*. Clarissa is an English graduate student at Harvard, is a liberal thinker pursuing higher studies to lead independent life. Clarissa's husband Duke expects her to deal with all the household chores all by herself along with her studies and fails to extend any support. Clarissa feels trapped and suffers deep down. Mary Anne Ferguson rightly said, "A woman who deliberately departs from a socially approved stereotype by playing a new role – developing a new life style – unusual must pay a heavy cost in guilt, alienation, or psychosis; tendencies toward schizophrenia may be aggravated by the person's sense of divided self." (6) Bela, on the other hand, is a professional dancer and she is married to a painter, Nishant, who initially extends his support in her career only to withdraw it later due to his ego. Bela is constantly balancing between her aspirations and social duties and her condition worsens after the birth of her children. Unlike Clarissa, Bela is more rebellious in her demeanour and she decides to divorce her husband. She later started her own dance academy and gained much fame and respect.

Sumitra-Val:

The resemblance between the two most radical characters in both the texts is quite visible – Val and Sumitra. Although their personal life situations are quite different, they are more alike in their attitude towards women's deteriorating position in society and their uncompromising attitude when it comes to seeking justice. Val is a graduate student at Harvard and she is a divorcee and a single-mother of a teenage daughter Christine. She is strong, authoritative and unbending in her demeanour. She is like a backbone of the group of women at Harvard that includes Mira. She is quite rebellious in her outlook towards life and society. Later, her life gets shattered when her daughter Christina is gang raped followed by Christina's harsh treatment at the police station and at the court. Val feels completely frustrated after this event and ends up joining the 'lunatic fringe' of militant feminists and

plans and supports the escape of five female prisoners. She gets killed during one of their endeavours.

Sumitra's story begins on a different note but she meets the same end as that of Val. She is educated and confident young woman who dreams to lead an independent life. She rebels against her own family by denying to marry a person who demands dowry and takes up a job later on to lead a life of respect and equality. Later she gets romantically involved with a married man who cheats on her with a false promise of marriage. She immediately breaks off with him only to face depression and hopelessness in life. Being a brave woman, Sumitra (Mitra) later turns her frustration into her strength and becomes a full time social worker working with a few NGOs for the welfare of women. Later when the inmates of Anandgram decide to fight for justice for a rape victim, Sumitra takes an active role and leads the procession bravely. During the procession Sumitra gets hit hard on the head by the police and loses her life as a result.

Similarity in the traits of Male Characters:

The two novels under scrutiny do not just share parallelism in the portrayal of women characters but share likeness in the representation of male characters. Majority of male characters exhibit stereotypical characteristics like egotism, selfishness, lack of empathy for their women counter-parts and male chauvinism. For example, the husbands of the central characters namely Norm, a successful doctor and Vyomesh, a senior executive in a reputed firm, do not care to extend any emotional supports to their wives who suffer in silence while they enjoy all the benefits of their gender including that of having affairs and demanding divorce as a result. The husbands of the following female characters in *The Women's Room* – Duke, Clarissa's husband, Harley, Kyla's husband and Adela and Martha's husbands – who are highly successful in their professional avenues, fail to support their wives in fulfilling their dreams of either getting higher education or pursuing careers just like Bela and Vasanti's husbands in *Saat Pagla Aakashma*. The character of Paul, Adela's husband, is a womaniser and denies taking any household responsibilities which leads to Adela taking up the entire burden of the household and responsibility of their five kids can be compared to the character of Deepak, Ranjana's husband who exhibit similar traits leading to the suicide of their only daughter Asha in *Saat Pagla Aakashma*.

Both these novels lack any vibrant male characters and even though men are present, their characters lack depth as they are presented as counter images of female characters. Men's point of view is hardly considered and even when presented, has a sarcastic tinge to them. Both male and female characters are portrait in black and white – over positive images of women while men are presented in dark shades. Even the man-woman relationship are presented in extreme shades and most of the couple lack mutual trust where the husband always fails to perform his duties towards his wife.

A Few Dissimilarities

Despite multiple similarities, the two novels are different from each other in their approach, cultural background and autobiographical elements. Kapadia has Indianized the entire theme to make it sound more engaging to Indian readers while French has represented the contemporary American suburban culture through the novel. For example, in *The Women's Room* Mira openly expresses her thoughts regarding sex and men, she even tries to explore her body during puberty and later we find her dating Lenny and having friendship with other boys of her class. Even in later life, when she moves to Harvard, she develops a romantic relationship with Ben, finds sexual satisfaction with him and even plans to marry him while Vasudha in *Saat Pagla Aakashma* is more restrained in her thoughts and actions and is more inclined towards nature. We also come across the personality traits of the authors in the central characters in these texts along with a few autobiographical elements. For example, Vasudha exhibits Kapadia's love for nature in form of many lengthy descriptions of sky and nature that we come across in the novel. As far as Vasudha and her marital issues are concerned, there is hardly any resemblance with that of Kapadia who was happily married to a famous writer Makrand Dave. When we consider French's personal life and experiences, we can clearly find many traces of her personal life getting represented through the life of Mira. Like French, Mira was involved in disharmonious marriage, had two kids and later she gets divorced. Mira attends Hofstra college and later joins Harvard to pursue her doctorate and joins a community college as a teacher just like French.

Comparative Analysis Of *Saat Pagla Aakashma* With Its English Rendering *Seven Steps In The Sky*

Kunjala Anthony (1936), along with her husband William Anthony (1932-2017), has translated this famous novel into English in 1994 as *Seven Steps in the Sky*. The couple worked as librarians in Australia. Kunjla Anthony is the younger sister of Kundanika Kapadia.

The English translation of the novel *Seven Steps in the Sky* (1994) falls short at various levels like linguistic, stylistic and hermeneutical. It fails to reproduce the brilliant artistic effect of the original as the translation hardly moves beyond the thematic and linguistic aspects and does not carry the semiotic and values of the original culture. At many points misrepresentation and ambiguity have taken place (along with omissions of large portions) and the translators had not bothered to deal with them through their creative talent.

The special apprehensions of Kapadia pertaining nature, condition of women in society, rise of feminism and its impact on women in India as well as in the West have been either skipped or mentioned in brief affecting the quality of translation at linguistic and stylistic levels. We can say that the translators of this novel were not able to pay their debt to the original author as they have actually created an abridged version of the original. Quite a large portion has been omitted from the original in the translation, particularly on the occasions of the description of nature, Indian values, description of sexuality and comments on Western culture and society, especially the condition of women in the West as compared

to their counterparts in India. Kundanika Kapadia was an ardent lover of nature and through her central character Vasudha and her inclination towards nature, the author has artistically described the beauty and magnitude of natural world in her novel at length. But in translation much of it has been omitted taking away the entire charm of the narration.

Even there are various references to male and female sexuality in Indian as well as Western context that are found missing in the translation. For example, while revealing the life story of Sumitra, the writer is reflecting upon the different concepts of love for man and woman in chapter nineteen where in the original text Kundanika Kapadia refers to the bodily desires and sex openly and how man and woman react differently to it. According to her, man and woman both have this desire but man has no physical bondages after it while a woman has to bear much due to it.

પુરુષને પ્રેમની જરૂર નથી હોતી? હોય છે, પણ એ તેની જરૂરિયાતનો થોડોઅમથો ભાગ છે... તેને ‘સેક્સ’ની જરૂર હોય છે. પણ એ એક ‘બાયોલોજીકલ ટ્રેજેડી’ છે કે દેહસંબંધનું પુરુષના દેહ પર પછી કોઈ બંધન રહેતું નથી, એ સંબંધનું પરિણામ ફક્ત સ્ત્રીના શરીરને જ બાંધે છે. (173)

In translation the entire section refereeing to sexual aspects in relationship have been skipped. There might be multiple reasons for this – the translators’ personal hesitation or the prevailing ideology where a Western reader would hesitate to accept that an Indian regional writer, woman that too, could so openly write about ‘bodily desires’ in her novel. The ideology of Western reader might not make him/her accept this fact related to Indian writer due to their concept of India and its people so the translators might have decided not to mention it in translation.

The question here is why this bowdlerization has occurred while rendering it into English which is considered to be a more advanced target language. Were the translators advocating prudish or Victorian morality? Or was it done deliberately with the aim of creating a different image of Gujarati literature and the writer which is yet considered incapable of talking about these sensitive issues in such a direct manner? The timing of the publication of the translation might have also played its part – during the 90s, the Western society was still battling to adjust between the old and the modern world which was emerging with newer trends and ideologies and was still struggling to find balance between the old and the new. In such circumstances, the translators might not want to confuse the Westerners more by mentioning such bold topics which were yet under scrutiny then. Had the translation occurred later, or done by a different translator having different set of ideology or social background, the translation of this benchmark novel would have turned out differently.

In chapters twenty-three and twenty-four Kapadia indulges into the description of the feminist ideology advocated by pioneers like Simone de Beauvoir or Betty Friedan at

length in context to the condition of women in the West. It is normally believed that women enjoy better position in the First World countries compared to their Third World counterparts. But when observed closely, we realize that the Western women too face exploitation and injustice. While in India women are exploited in the name of religion, culture and social norms, in the West women, despite education and awareness, live under the constant pressure of the false notions of physical beauty and charm. In spite of better opportunities of education and progress, they live under fear of losing their male counterparts if they do not make efforts to look young, attractive and desirable. Even the concept of materialistic luxury prevailing in the West without any moral sense, particularly in the matter of loose sexual morality, has been strongly criticised by the original author. The translation has excluded most of the paragraphs which describe these sensitive issues.

The possible reason could be the translators' own ideology regarding what should be and should not be included in a literary text. Even the translation seems to be meant for the Western reader and so in order not to disparage them with the criticism of their cultural and social system, the translators might have decided to leave out any such references without considering the fact that they are doing injustice to the original writer and the text which is highly recommended as a feminist text showing deep concerns for women and their issues. The injustice becomes even stronger and visible in this case where a woman translator is doing it to a woman writer, her own sister as a matter of fact. When questioned regarding the possible readers of the translation and the reasons for so much omission, the translator Kunjbala Anthony said, "When I first read it I thought it was worth translating for Western readers. As we sat down to do it in English, it did not seem so good as we started looking at it in fine details. Bill (William Anthony) felt it was totally unsophisticated. What was in Gujarati sounded silly in English...We didn't have women reader in India in mind when doing it...Omissions were made with the permission of the author, in fact we went through the whole translation together. They were made for the reasons like a lot of repetition, plagiarism, factual errors etc." (2020)

Many culture-specific words, terms or references have been skipped in majority of the cases while at times the subtle hints given by the original author meant for the readers to read between the lines have been directly put forward in translation. Despite the linguistic and cultural differences of the source and the target languages, the translators could have sensibly used the hermeneutics or etymology of the Gujarati language and culture to make more sense of the original author and her intentions to create a richer version of English translation. And in this particular case, one of the translators' (Kunjbala) mother tongue happens to be Gujarati and she also had a direct access to the original author Kundanika Kapadia who was her elder sister in case of clarification on any ambiguity pertaining language or culture.

Due to these factors the translation seems dreary and flat and could not attract any

critical acclamation in the target culture. The most unfortunate part is that the translators could have taken their translation of this significant Gujarati novel to an altogether new level as they share a family bond with the original writer but they ended up producing a dull replica, completely devoid of the spark of the original due to their biased view points of the Indian regional literature and writers – Kunjbala Anthony mentioned in her interview that they do not think much of this novel as she and William found it quite repetitive and amateur leading to a lot of editing, with the permission of the writer, of course. (2020) As a result the English translation of this popular Gujarati novel ended up transforming it into an ordinary tale of women suffering to seek justice in this unjust world. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (2000) comments on the role of a translator in her famous essay 'The Politics of Translation' are worth mentioning here, "I can agree that it is not bodies of meaning that are transferred in translation. And from the ground of that agreement I want to consider the role played by language for the *agent*, the person who acts, even though intention is not fully present to itself. The task of the feminist translator is to consider language as a clue to the workings of gendered agency." (397)

Conclusion

To conclude, I can say that a new era of women's writing began with the publication of these two pioneer novels – *The Women's Room* and *Saat Pagla Aakashma* and both French and Kapadia took the helm through their brilliant literary talent to introduce radical feminism into the sphere of literature and inspired many writers to come. Kapadia had been inspired by French's feminist ideas and seemed to have taken liberty with her line of plot and her representation of characters. Still she deserves her share of credit for her artistic and narrative skills as she has been successful in giving the entire thematic aspect an Indian touch and presented the gender realities of Indian family and social set up. Her characters might be inspired by those of French's but her treatment of them and their attitude are Indian in essence.

At the same time, it is quite disheartening to note that the English rendering of this famous Gujarati novel could not do much justice to the original author. The actual motif of Kapadia in writing the story of Vasudha for advocating women's right and demanding positive change in their condition is somehow lost in the process of translation. Thus we can say that the translation, in this particular case, has gained less and lost more in its rewriting process. And it is a matter of surprise that during these forty-one years since the publication of this translation, no efforts are made to re-translate this remarkable text into English to establish the original novel's prestige into target culture.

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