SAT PAGLAN AKASHMAN – ‘Seven Steps in the Sky’ – eminently a committed novel is Kundanika Kapadia’s tour de force. It is a landmark in the recent history of women’s literature in Gujarati. Hardly any other book by a woman writer has evoked the range and variety of responses, sparked off critical controversy, aroused popular interest the way Sat Paglan has. During its serialization in a Gujarati daily of Bombay she was hugely acclaimed and wildly admonished: “You deserve Nobel Prize”, “You should be jailed”, “The character of Vasudha: I guess I’ve met her, I know her..... It’s me’”, etc. It soon became the rage of readers. Where the book-trade is in doldrums, its two editions during the first year of its publication speak volumes for its enormous popularity. For its seriousness of purpose, intellectual energy and large canvas, the novel is commendable. It is a loud-throated protest against injustice and indignities inflicted on women by men. Many a woman reader at least is apt to identify herself with one woman character or another in the novel if not with the heroine altogether and hear in her voice an authentic and sincere cry that remained strangled and unheard for long. At one level, it is a quest for self-realization through total love and total freedom. Here is a work of art that so much obliterates the line of demarcation between art and life that the novelist could have as well said: “This is no book. He who touches the book touches woman”. Woman is so vitally and outstandingly at the center of the novel that but for her symbolical concern the novel might have as
well said: "This is no book. He who touches the book touches woman". Woman is so vitally and outstandingly at the center of the novel that but for her symbolical concern the novel might have as well entitled it 'woman' as it was intended originally. Woman is the protagonist of the novel, caught in to meshes of a social structure where inevitably man is an antagonist. Sprawling over more than five hundred pages, Sat Paglan unfolds more than seven stories of women as victims, prey to the man-made conventions and practices that exploit and oppress them. The four walls of their homes are prison-walls as it were denying them love and freedom, which are at the thematic and symbolical center of the novel that is subtitled in its long Shavian preface as Woman's Pilgrimage: From Captivity Kailas, the preface that promises to answer several question raised in the novel – an attempt to assist art in its didactic function. Here the creative process loses quite a bit of its autonomy and is conditioned and controlled to serve a missionary cause.

I've taken interest in the Women's Lib Movement right from the start. After gathering all the material I intended to write a treatise called Woman. Meanwhile, reading Woman's Room, etc I thought if I too had to communicate all this why not write a novel?

Indeed a formidable genesis for a work so ambitiously planned. When a treatise is chosen to be turned into a novel, inculcates a great conflict between the artist and the propagandist. The mould here is rather feebly built, and the burden of ideas and incidents nearly cracks it leaving the content of the work aesthetically untransmuted, even raw.

The novelist is blissfully conscious of this. "Most of the situations in the novel, "she points out, "are based on facts, and that way this is a documentary novel".

Facts often submerge fiction, and we have dissonance between art and life, imagination and actuality, illusion and reality threatening to fracture the novel. Does not E.M. Forster raise a rhetorical question "whether people could be taken out of life and put into
a book and conversely whether they could come out of books and sit down in this room”, and answer firmly in the negative? Here is the logical end. Esha, the narrator, feels fatigued in the middle of the story:

You’ll perhaps be bored of reading this. At times, I too feel tired of writing this, for all these tales are the tales of anguish and unrest...... if I had viewed thing differently i should have written differently.

Ah, that’s the rub! It is not that art has gone off the artist’s control like John Gilpin’s horse. She has achieved what she had aimed at. Even the characters in the novel are not allowed to adapt themselves to the creative necessity but are made to serve the ulterior purpose, thus determining the relationship between the narrator and the story. The results are, they tend to be types, flat rather than round. Because of an overwhelming feminine angle of vision, men are delineated far more feebly than women. But here is no art for art’s sake, not even for life’s sake; it is art for woman’s sake. And as an artist, hasn’t Kundanika an autonomy?

Malcolm Bradbury’s idea of the contemporary novel fits Sat Paglan like a glove: “The novel is seriality at its largest, a fiction committed to prose and length. Using the instrument of public discourse.... It is kin to history, or biography, or extended argument”. The silently suffering archetypal woman here keeps on speaking with staggering breathlessness; their dialogues are loud public discourses, their intimate chats seminars The extraordinary accent on argument in the novel which weakens its structure not only hampers the flow of narrative that freely meanders through memory lanes but it also highlights the dichotomy of form and content as if a work of art had no integral organic unity. The net result is a polarity of praises and abuses for content on the one hand and form on the other respectively, blurring the perspective. ‘Sat Paglan has an intricate plot charting the emotional and Intellectual contours of women rather than men with several pegs to hang a number of stories of the women wronged, oppressed
exploited, betrayed, deserted, jilted, violated, even raped by men so much so that man emerges the villain of the piece. The main plot unfolds the central story of Vasudha and Vyomesh whose married life more than three decades is on the rocks, and Vasudha in her fifties turns her back on her home, three grown up children, and damned husband. She is Ibsen’s Nora, reincarnated in Gujarat after a century. But unlike Nora she does not walk alone in a dark night of uncertain destiny in pursuit of the supreme duty, duty to self. She sojourns to the utopia of Anandgram and, after lengthy and insidious arguments and a melodramatic protest march, ultimately heads for the sky-kissing Himalayas in the company of Aditya, her long-lost dream boy, who exclaims: “How high does earth rise there, how low does the sky descend.” Who knew these idealists were also great escapists?

The way Aditya’s shadows keep on falling across Vasudha’s path of life from end to end is vital to our understanding of not only Vasudha’s psyche, but also her attitude to the other men including her husband Vyomesh. After a serious emotional crisis, when Vyomesh kept up callously the mask of happiness at the party in the face of Falba’s death, Vasudha recalls a moment that haunts her. It was the eve of her wedding. She had gone to the terrace to meet her greatest lover, the sky.

...... that day the western sky was also so very beautiful. The Sun had just set there was such a play of colours, red, gold, crimson in the clouds. She was spellbound... she wished she could sit there and gaze at beauty to her content.... Ah, if Aditya were here! He would have understood.

Poor Vyomesh! It would fall to his lot to reckon with an invisible rival right from the start. Vasudha’s dream boy wrapped in platonic love and securely placed in her subconscious. Here is a Freudian clue that helps us understand not merely Vasudha’s view of husbands but also the novelist’s treatment of sex in the novel. Kundanika, unlike Lawrence, does not know both fascination and torment of sex or raise it to the
poetic height. She knows only the torment of sex. She abhors and shuns it. Sex is sin. Vasudha complains:

Man needs sex; he needs someone to look after him, to perpetuate his progeny. After all, there is little room for selfless beautiful love.

But her body-dread reaches limits when this mother of three laments:

Could any man realize what it is to be pregnant? What’s the state of that ever increasing load? Even a coolie sets aside his burden and relaxes but from this burden there isn’t a moment’s relief....

What a beast of burden a mother in the making is! Could maternity be more morbidly viewed? No wonder hence that these new women find motherhood a myth, a trap, an exploitation. Kundanika need not read Shaw’s Man and Superman to recognize her kind as an instrument of life-force. But her perverse view of motherhood leaves us depressed. It gives such a backthrust to our understanding of man-woman relationship in the novel that we are baffled in retrospect. When Amit breaks off the engagement and declines to marry Amita who refuses to go to bed with him before marriage we suspect it does not reveal so much the novelist’s moral vision as her abhorrence of sex. Again when Vasudha steers Vyomesh away from bed saying, “Don’t you touch me. No, not today. Today I’ve got back my time, got back my body, got back my feeling. Now only if I wish it...” she betrays sex nausea. This disgust conditions vitally her approach not merely to men but also to the institutions of family and marriage, found everywhere in ruins in *Sat Paglan*.

The women in the novel are more seize with dislike for men rather than the spirit of revolt. It is a woman’s world agog with drums and trumpets of the petticoat army at war with the wretched male homosapiens. But for the ‘villains’ like vyomesh, Vipul, Satish and a host of them, Vasudha, Sumitra, Ana and the whole lot of them should have turned the society
into utopia, Anandgram. The sound and fury of rhetoric only sharpens the lack of objective correlative since the female reaction is out of all proportion. These women continually remind us of Fernham and Lundberg who in Modern Women: The Lost Sex complain:

"They have listened too readily to the siren songs of women's movement, learn to hate men while at the same time, they seek to achieve maleness."

The result is frustrating. We do have here dynamic, spirited, young women but they fail to appeal to the readers' imagination as women. Beginning with Sarasvatichandra and ending with Manavini Bhavai there is no dearth of dynamic heroines who are also every inch women, haunting the dreams of the readers, young and old alike. But women in this novel are all too cold, too frigid, too angry to appeal to the men as men. This becomes a snag when we see that Sat Paglan is so much a woman's novel that even if it were anonymous its feminine identity could not be mistaken. The reason is, apart from the partisan stand, the view is lopsided and inhibited. Here is greater woman interest than human interest, what one looks for in a work of art is the imaginative and emotional experience, but Sat Paglan disappoints because of its fierce commitment.

The narrative technique confounds confusion. As the narrator Esha rembles through the memory lanes she makes a narrative mess. Equally intriguing is the identity of the narrator. At least, three of them, Esha, Vasudha, and of course Kundanika are so identical in their approaches and attitudes and share so much a common idiom that it is hard to know who's who. Esha has not been adequately dramatized and installed in the novel to displace the author. Again, Kundanika makes Vasudha so much her own shadow that we feel that all three of them keep on elbowing one another with the novelist playing a triple role. This leaves Sat Paglan a novel most loosely put together.

Maybe, Kundanika Kapadia, like Bernard Shaw, might not
want to face the toil of wring a single word for mere art. She wants literature to be rooted firmly in the soil of life. And Sat Pagalan has succeeded in discharging the function set by its author to hold a mirror up to the society. There are in the novel some moments of love, and beauty and tenderness, and the vignettes of nature steadily building up the central symbol of the sky. It expands and sprawls in the heroine’s consciousness in a way that it releases her from all the narrow constraints and unavailing strife.

_Sat Paglan Akashman signifies Saptapadi_, the wedding ritual of seven steps pledging everlasting companionship from here to eternity. The sky looming large connotes not merely infinite boundlessness, if Vasudha is earth, Vyomesh is the sky. Swarup gently whispers to Vasudha:

_I’ve seen you as a symbol of the earth. The earth’s power is infinite. Its creativity knows no end._

_Woman is the earth, man the sky. It is in its symbolism that the novel embodies beauty and poetry, the qualities that Kundanika has, but of which she has little use in a novel like this. What lingers in our memory at the end of the painful, strifetorn story or, say, stories is the human discord and conflict._

_To end with one of the numerous skyscapes, spread out over the large canvas of the novel filling up its vast, vacant spaces with solitude, silence and poetry of the sky is to recognize the potential poetic quality of the novelist’s art of fiction that tends to redeem all the loud stress and strain of Sat Paglan:_

_Light completely faded out. Darkness sprawled. All over the sky the stars twinkled.... Her soul began to rise in a vast, limitless and endless space. Her consciousness, like a boat with a full-blown sail, glided across the sky, rambling through the corridor of luminous stars. Her body at once became absolutely light. She was flying without wings; her soul was journeying through some vast unknown of boundless time and space... joy of the infinite pervaded her existence._
Maya in a Memory Lane

by

R.A. DAVE

Is it the whole truth to say that Maya Anand is no more? Is she now a mere illusion as her name connotes? Shakespeare, in a romantic mood in Romeo and Juliet puts a rhetorical question:

*What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet*

Her name was Maya, which has many meaning ranging from illusion to love, the whole gamut of semantics. Like Tennyson’s Ulysses, whose words:

*Yet all experience is an arch wherethro’
Gleams that untravell’d world whose margin fades*

*For ever and forever when I move*

Were Maya’s favorite lines of poetry, she has, maybe, followed, like a sinking star, the vast unknown beyond the horizon. Maya, as a poet, is on an endless cruise of eternity. Researching on Shakespeare’s vanishing characters, I happened to stumble on an invincible sanctuary where even death cannot lay his icy hand, I mean the human memory. There are instances in his plays where, probably under the pressure of the plot, some of the characters, as young as, at times even younger than Maya, just disappear without leaving a word behind. But even after the fall of the curtain or closing of the book of the play, we keep on hearing their footfalls haunting us. Where are they, if alive? Maybe, they are dead, who knows? And I helplessly speculated Perhaps, these young dream children were so dear to their creator that he would not let them drop dead on the stage. But like music sinking into silence from sound, they are transported into the invincible sanctuary of the memory of the audiences, where they know no death. Maya too, lives in the memory of all who love her and whom she loved, as much as she lives in the imperishable words of her poetry. Could this be at all our illusion ever? To Voltaire, “illusion is the queen of human heart”. Yes, indeed. The Upanishads enjoin: “One should know *Maya* as nature”, or if Maya be at all an illusion, or the world a lie, Sri Aurobindo in The Life Divine affirms: “The world is *Maya* “So says also Plato in The Allegory of the Cave, suggesting how the eternal alone is true. All the same, Maya had her own poetic view of illusion and reality. In *The Blue Lie*, written towards the end of her life, she seems to be gazing at the blue sky and then wonders:

*Does it exist? Of course not.....
It’s a lie....made to look true*
She cautions us against the perils of illusion of the blue sky mirrored in water.

*If you walk into water thinking it’s glass,
You’ll fall into every puddle you pass.*

*So it reflects the lie of the heavens above*

That is the way she imaginatively apprehends the dichotomy of illusion and reality, its mystery. She believes that

*It’s there to make us feel held in space*

*And to mask the truth*

*That we are floating in a cosmic maze.*

The mask of truth! What an image! But lest the unmasked truth should leave us sleepless, she consoles:

*If you can’t sleep, reader...well...*

*Treat this as a lullaby,*

*Goodnight!*

What an irony that lullaby of illusion put not the reader but the poetess to endless sleep.

She lived life in its entire splendor and fullness in a way that it often tended to be a dream, but never an illusion. She was always on the move:

*My life is but a journey*

*Through a turbulent stream.*

*Time, you’re the waters, I’ve the oars*

*For long I’ve been in this boat*

as she declares in her poem Time. We are at once put in mind of Tagore’s Sonar Tari, the golden boat of life on the waves of time. Raja Rao quotes, as the epigraph of ‘The Serpent and the Rope,’ “Waves are but water and so is the sea”. Maya presents a fascinating though painful tension between herself and time:

*Leave me, I pray*

*Give me but a moment’s rest*

Dead tired on the track of time!

*Elusive queen, you appear gentle, yet your grip*

*Too tight, you hold me with eagle’s claws.*

*I am emasculated*

*...

*I am tired...*

*You drag me through the endless cosmos*

*An elliptical path....*

...
Alas! We are all but entangled in your many arms
That pull, that pull, pull towards the unknown
The deceptive future, you make me cross hurdles
To find more and more hurdles, the path uphill

Guide my path to the end of the stream.

Maya’s imagery is not only fascinating and fresh, but also most intriguing. Here time is not the old gypsy man, but a female, an elusive queen. In the green world of imagination, she moved unfettered like Alice in the wonderland. But unlike Alice, when she wanted to get away she had no Cheshire cat to guide her if she asked: “Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?” Or else the Cat should have counseled: “I don’t much care where ... so long as I get somewhere”, should the Cat have replied: “Oh, you’re sure to do that, if you only walk long enough”? Maya did walk away, although she walked alone.

To Maya poetry was, as to Robert Bridges, ‘the testament of beauty’, but more than that it was also the testament of faith, above all faith in God. Maya’s was a nascent poetic mind, and she had, unlike Keats, not imaginatively charted the contours of “the realms of gold”, she had only tiptoed on its far off frontiers. But the wide range of her thematic concerns, tenderness and sensibility, and the poems like Time and Blue Lie promised a good deal, had not death snatched her away too soon, in a hurry.

My association with Maya’s poetry was posthumous, since we hardly met outside the humanities classes at the CEPT. When I read her poem Good Girls I at once recognized it as her self-portrait, endowed with all the excellent qualities that she expected in good girls even at her tender age of eleven.

To her, it seems, life was larger than literature. On academic exchange programme she travelled far and wide in East and West, between Gangtok and Vienna, the Alps and the Himalayas. She was fast coming of age. On the last day of her life she had submitted a paper which had these words:

....I feel more ‘Indian’ and ‘context’ has taken a more important place in my concerns. Therefore, I hope to evolve further as an architect and person....

In our new India where globalization has come to mean some sort of de-Indianisation, and liberalization a kind of vulgar, even obscene consumerism, a slap on the face of poor Mother India, it is rare to come across a young university-girl feeling ‘more Indian’ and who tries to understand ‘life and people’ to be a good architect, giving life.... Character and meaning to architecture".
It does not quite often fall to a teacher’s lot to come across a lot of students like Maya, particularly when formal education tends to be fast, heartless and passive. I remember the day when in my interactive class in the humanities, I attempted a definition saying: “Concern for others is a mark of culture”, while lamenting that wars and conflicts stood as the most disturbing milestones down the passage of history. Her eyes gleamed astonishingly as if suggesting something of the sort that she had said in her poem Harmony:

Think of others.....
Think of the weak...
Then the world will be fun
It will help us live in harmony

I had not read the poem written by her at age twelve, I was almost rehashing it. One more memory. It was near the end of the twentieth century. While briefly examining the history if ideas, I happened to juxtapose the 1890’s and the 1990’s, suggesting how decadence of the fin de siècle was, as it were, a forerunner of the twentieth century beset with two world wars, gas chambers, genocides, shrugged atlas, fractured nations and the atom bomb. The 1990’s witnessed the world as a far greater wasteland though, in spite of the extraordinary advancement of science and technology. If yes, what would be the shape of things to come during the twenty-first century and the new millennium? I had upset the class a bit. There was a good deal of excitement replete with agreement and disagreement. But I was none too sure about my pronunciation of the French phrase. And who came to my rescue? None else but Maya who taught her teacher the correct pronunciation: fan de seeck’l. Maya and I had played a most interesting handy-dandy. How living and lively could be the classroom if only there were more students like Maya, otherwise how dead.

The classroom brightened up despite my pessimistic fears. It is hard not to feel bereft when such a sensitive and brilliant girl, who loved life and literature, who loved god and whom god loved, all of a sudden rises up and falls down fatally from the roof of her alma mater. But as a poet Maya was a pilgrim of eternity, not an idle dreamer, certainly not an illusion. Let Emily Dickinson reassure us with the intimations of immortality

The world is not a conclusion,
A sequel stands beyond.
Invisible as music
But positive as sound

The eternal music rising from sound lapses into silence, but it is everlasting and rises again and again, and yet again. So is Maya, for ever in our mind and heart very much alive and kicking, giving us a reflective backthrust in the impregnable
sanctuary of our memory. Maya’s cosmic consciousness had many contours left uncharted. What a tragic final fall! Could there be a cosmic computer, invisible though, where the tragedies such as this be programmed? Maya in The Eagle and the pigeon gave a celestial flight to her hunted birds to ask the Maker “if what man did was right?” But how can man, poor man, who has not been able to solve the mystery of his own entry and exit, understand whether tragedies such as this were ever programmed by some inscrutable computerist?

Maya’s poems remind us of beyond the Horizon by Shruti Pankaj, another Indian girl as young as Maya, from London. What Fenner Brockway said in response to Shruti’s poetry fits Maya’s so much I cannot help quoting: “whence comes her music for words, knowledge, philosophy, serenity, love of mankind, and sense of eternity?” These young girls also prove that English is not altogether our second language. Maya, too, was the girl with an earthen lamp which the rough wind blew out so mercilessly. But the light endures.

[Prof Dave taught Maya humanities at CEPT, Ahmedabad. He had retired and left CEPT before her tragic end. It is only recently that he came to know of the poems, and promptly wrote this gracious tribute, at the age of eighty.]

___ Av\cvi A. j _____

— Mrs. Anand, Maya’s Mother