
Embitterment to Empowerment: Journey of the Female self in Jaisree Misra's Ancient Promises

Dr. Mini V S, Asst. Professor, St.Xavier's College for Women, Aluva 683101

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Abstract

The spirit of revolt arose out of mechanical life, mismatched marriage, and wayward ways of the husbands have forced women to come out in the open to register their dissent. Jaisree Misra, one of the notable Indian women writers of the present century, presents the journey of the female self from embitterment to empowerment in her novel *Ancient Promises*. Even though the story is a type of autobiography, Misra has beautifully portrayed the difficulties a woman has to face in an orthodox family, especially the difficulties of bringing up a child who is mentally disabled without any help and finally breaking away all the obstructions in her life by deciding on her own to face the absolute reality. The author beautifully presents the psychological sufferings of Janu in the novel. Mostly women are the victims of any unsuccessful marriage. As against the parents' beliefs that Janu's marriage to Suresh will provide good fortune to their daughter, it proves to be only a misalliance. But Janu's bold decision, in the end, frees her, and she gets the life she aspired for.

Keywords: female self, embitterment, empowerment, psychological sufferings, absolute reality.

Women's liberation in India, subtly handled, had set aside the patriarchal dominance to a certain extent in the country. Women writers made some practical efforts to uphold womanhood through their writings proudly. The spirit of revolt arose out of mechanical life, mismatched marriage, and wayward ways of the husbands have forced women to come out in the open to register their dissent. Jaishree Misra is the writer of this decade. An Indian author born in 1961 to a Malayali family, Misra had spent her childhood in New Delhi, Bangalore, and England. She is the great-niece of the late Thakazhi Sivasankaran Pillai, an extraordinarily brilliant Malayalam writer, and Jnanapith awardee.

Her debut novel, *Ancient Promises*, was published and sold worldwide by Penguin U.K., and it became a major bestseller in India. Even if Misra's works are mainly woman-centric, her characters do not conform to the stereotypes we expect from women writers. She problematizes the concept of woman's empowerment in most of her novels. The protagonist's life runs parallel to that of the writer. Many of the characters and events in the book bear close resemblance to the real-life characters and circumstances of the author. The moving

story of one woman's painful journey of self-discovery, Ancient Promises, is about a marriage, a divorce, and motherhood.

Misra does not present the typical plot of a weak, silent, suffering, voiceless woman who is trapped in an oppressive, male-dominated atmosphere, gathers courage one fine day, breaks free of all restraints, and walks bravely into a life of intellectual, emotional and financial independence. Most of her heroines are born into families that value and love the girl child, believe in educating her, and accept her right to articulate her thoughts and feelings. The crisis comes not because of any patriarchal oppression or other reasons. It is through the depiction of marriage-related problems and the heroine's overcoming of them that Misra shows her distinctiveness.

Misra's concept of the empowered woman is that of a being who does not see man as her enemy even while being trapped in a patriarchal setup. She finds a way to overcome her problems and arrive at a solution. In that process, she is not averse to seeking and using the assistance of trusted men within her inner circle. The central paradox in her women protagonists is the mismatch between their character and fate. Her women work hard for their freedom and earn it. But luck is not always favorable for them. The liberty they deserve is never absolute because it does not have the power to guarantee their choicest wish, which is the safety of the lives they wish to protect. A woman is always expected to adjust in a marital relationship. She has to blindly obey the whims and fancies of her husband to sustain happiness. In this regard, Jessie

Bernard remarks, "The international structure of the marriage has invested the husband with authority and backed it by the power of church and state. The marriage of wives has thus been officially dominated by the husband" (10).

Jaisree Misra's Ancient Promises is the story of a loving and obedient daughter, a compassionate but guilty lover, a restless and miserable wife, a helpless and despairing mother – a woman constantly searching for an identity and pursuing her rightful share of happiness. It's the fascinating story of the protagonist, Janaki's long journey traced through a happy childhood, an unexpected arranged marriage, marital problems and frustrations, and a traumatic ending in strife, finally culminating with the finding of her everlasting love in a true fairytale fashion.

Janu is a Malayali Nair girl, born and brought up in Delhi, whose father was an air commodore in Delhi. Janu (Janaki) lived in Delhi for the first eighteen years of her life. The narration moves to her journey from innocence to experience. She is brought up in a very traditional Malayali family. Her mother was a teacher. The western lifestyle gets deeply rooted in her mind during her childhood. Janu's parents have sent her to a good school. She feels better about her education and says: "I'd been enrolled in the Irish convent school because my parents wanted me to speak English well and get a head start in sophisticated Delhi society" (18). Janu's parents want her to become fluent in English; for that, she has been sent to an Irish convent school, where she receives a quality education. They thought providing

quality education would help their daughter lead a good life in society.

On the contrary, she does not fulfill her parents' wishes and thoughts. At the age of seventeen, she meets a young man named Arjun. He is a cricketer at the local school. At first, Janu falls in love with him. Their love blooms into romance. Events drastically change when her father's friend sees her on Arjun's bike when she should have been in her maths-tuition class. This has made their father of Janu angry.

After that, he confines his freedom to Janu. The parents put many curbs on the release of the daughter. She is not allowed to continue the drama practice or go for tuition. She is not even allowed to use the telephone. She is escorted by someone whenever she goes out. All these restrictions are due to their love for their daughter. Janu's parents worry for her future. They are afraid of her conduct in developing a relationship with a boy. They shower more love on her, and they concern more for her. That is why they put many restrictions on her movement. Her parents want their daughter to behave as an excellent Malayali girl. Further, their father of Janu never likes youngsters falling in love. Janu delineates his aversion for love:

I was pretty sure my parents would disapprove; I'd heard Dad harrumph loudly at love scenes in films, worried they would fill my head with silly notions. Love, for him, had been the stirring in his heart when his mother had shown him the picture of a fresh-faced girl she'd chosen for him to marry eighteen years ago. This running-

around-trees business was for film stars and fools, he often said. (23)

Janu's father thinks love is a kind of business and is meant only for film stars and fools. He dislikes even the love scenes on television. He contends that many factors determine marriage, such as caste, religion, economic status, etc. That is why the father of Janu expresses his contempt for love and considers it a trivial "running-around-trees" business. Jaishree Misra reveals the attitude of tradition-bound Indian people who fervently oppose the love affairs of youth. Janu does not know how to tell her relationship with Arjun to her parents. Her parents whisk her away to her native Kerala and arrange her marriage with a groom "handpicked by them" from a socially respected Marwar family. Janu is confused and unsure of her future with Arjun.

Unwilling to hurt her parents, she aggresses the proposal and gets married to Suresh on her 18th birthday. Janaki is upset at the turn of events, but she is not bulldozed into a marriage to Suresh. She thinks over her situation:

The fact of Arjun's departure was starting to sink in as something natural and permanent. He'd gone, not for a month or a year but probably forever. Ma was right; it was crazy to expect we'd ever share a future. We'd always occupied different worlds; now, they could have been separate universes. (62)

Even after her marriage, Janu's parents love her very much and provide much-needed comfort and guidance to her. She understands the depth of the mother's love when her mother treats her in an ailing

condition. It is an unforgettable experience for Janu:

I could hear Ma start to cry silently beside me again. My mother was as good as her word, administering Dr. Krishnan Menon's medicines every few hours, usually with eyes brimming over with tears. I know that as long as the medication went on, I would continue to have a tongue made of lead and a baby that would not cooperate with its thoughts. But I could not tell them that, so I watched sadly as my mother and grandmother carried me from my bed to the bathroom to wash and bath me. They would then wipe me down carefully and dress me in colorful saris and blouses that were now far too big for me. (231)

Janu has suffered terribly due to her illness. Her mother and Ammamma take her to the hospital for treatment, and with their help, Janu slowly recovers from the disease. Through this portrayal, JaishreeMisra brings out the genuine love and concern of Janu's mother and grandma towards her. It strengthens the bond of the family. The elders showed their devotion to the younger ones in the family. Arjun leaves for the U.K., where he decides to pursue his college education while living with his mother. And when she writes a letter to Arjun to inform him of her impending wedding, her justifications display a combination of rational thinking and filial loyalty:

..... I'm tired of fighting off my family; they've proven their love for me in the eighteen years it's taken to bring me up. And can't believe they'd push me into something that would be wrong for me. I

know you think of it as a stupidly blind kind of trust, but there it is. (63)

Janu enters the typical, traditional matriarchal Maraar household where everyone is fighting for affection and acceptance. Besides, she is given all assurances that she can pursue her studies. There is no compulsion from her husband or her rather strong-willed mother-in-law to start a family. But for all these advantages, life does not move smoothly for her. Her husband's family resents her Delhi background and treats her as an outcast, excluding her from household activities and discussions. To compound her agonies, her husband Suresh is very aloof and uncaring, more concerned about his business. A few years pass by, and the family is still indifferent to Janu, who now feels unaccepted and miserable. Janaki is not whole-heartedly accepted into the Marwar family. And it is to gain acceptance that Janaki herself decides to put her studies on the back burner and start a family:

Perhaps, just perhaps, having a child would solve my problems more quickly than a B.A. and a job. That's what I'd do. I'd have a child! She, as their grandchild, would be loved, especially if he could turn out to be the much -longed-for grandson. And, as his mother, I'd receive a sort of instant double-promotion. Be elevated to the position of good Mother and Good Daughter-in-Law. And spin out the rest of my days basking in a kind of reflected glory and blissful motherhood. (113)

She hopes that the arrival of a child will change the family's attitude towards her. But when she delivers a mentally

challenged baby girl Riya, the misery only piles on.

She was not going to provide me with a passport to their love and affection; she did not have one herself. My struggle was over. I grabbed at the realization with a weary but dizzy, almost overwhelming sense of liberation. I neither had to struggle for their approval anymore nor put Riya through the same hopeless loop. I wasn't sure why I had so quickly given up my right to be loved, allowing it to fade into oblivion somewhere long ago. But a child like Riya left unloved would wither and perish. Couldn't they see that her kind of innocence could only understand love, not the lack of it? My right had not seemed worth fighting for, but Riya needed me to her voice, and a battle on her behalf would be far more satisfying. I was soon going to become the thorn in the Maraar side. (132-133)

She raises Riya without any help and, at the same time, pursues her education. Her growing frustration gets worse with her father's death. Janaki's empowerment lies not in getting herself heard and respected but instead in rescuing her child from a debilitating atmosphere. The advent of Janaki, the responsible and protective, may appear stereotypical, but Jaishree Misra brings a twist to the plot. Janaki's escape lies in getting herself educated; she applies to study abroad so that she can take Riya there and treat her. Education holds the key to true empowerment, and it has to be admitted that Janaki manages to complete her undergraduate and post-graduate studies while living in the Maraar household. Janaki decides to take Riya to Arizona,

where she can realize her to a specialist school for children. She wants to continue her education by getting admission for M.A. in special education. She needs a lot of money to treat Riya and her teaching. She applies for a scholarship. She leaves for Delhi to attend a scholarship interview. Now she is eager to see her lover Arjun in Delhi. Old passions arise, and she realizes the need to meet him. She visits Leena, her friend in Delhi. At Leena's residence, Janu meets Arjun. Janu tells her husband that she wants to file for divorce to end their miserable marriage. Their conversation reflects their mind:

Suresh, I have to ask you . . . please, I don't want to hurt you . . . I knew I sounded weak and pleading and not firm and assertive as I'd planned. 'Suresh . . .' It was coming out now, all in a rush; nothing could stop it now, 'Suresh-I want a divorce.' He looked at me with a pretend surprise on his face. He wasn't shocked, but I could see he felt obliged to have shock, hurt, and horror...We're not happy together. That's the point. I'm not satisfied with you; I suppose I've never been. It's not your fault, and I think we are just different. We seem to need other things from life. (217)

Suresh tries to persuade her to stay back. Janu takes it as an advantage and reveals her love affair with Arjun. She sticks to her decision to go abroad. Suresh tries to pretend that he is ready to forget her past and forgive her because, after all, she is his wife. But Janu never forgets her husband. She is aware of the tricks played by her husband. She goes to Arjun's house, and there she succumbs to her love for Arjun. Janu begins to respond to every

move that her lover makes. The novelist recollects her own experiences, which are similar to those of her heroine Janu: "We met again after ten years of silence in the circumstances not dissimilar to those described in the book, effectively ending my marriage." (307)

Janu made up her mind to leave for England. Her husband and in-laws have created many obstacles preventing her from going abroad. Her husband's ego got deflated as his wife was leaving him. No one in the Maraar family had gone through such kind of experience before. The Maras admitted her to an asylum. Janu's mother helps to come out of that dungeon. Suresh played another trick by taking away Riya with him. He thinks that Janu cannot live without her daughter. Her life without Riya is incomplete.

At last, in the legal fight, Janu wins. Suresh had to reconcile himself to the divorce and handed his daughter to her mother. He nods for divorce. Janu is not ready to suffer and sacrifice as traditional Indian women do. She wants to project her image as an individual, free from all kinds of conservative thinking which seeks to overthrow her. She is ready to fight her way against all odds coming in her way to fulfilling her aspirations. She rebels against the existing patriarchal quotes and social norms, which, in theory, or practice, tend to relegate the woman to a secondary place in society. Her rebellious craving for individuality and happiness cannot but result in the breakup of her family.

Marriage becomes meaningful and enjoyable when mutual love and respect are part of the relationship. When Janu tries to

love and establish good relations with her in-laws, she is neither accepted nor loved by them. To protect herself and her daughter, she starts revolting against the snobbish conventions of the Hindu patriarchal society. In England, Janu meets Arjun, spending almost every weekend together. Her studies also progress. On her return, Janu's mother informs her that Suresh is ready for the divorce and to return to Riya. In search of true love and self-preservation, she takes an unconventional step to create her own space and make humaneness triumph over mere customs and traditions. Through her revolutionary decision, Janu paves a path to emancipation and establishes the right balance between duty and human dignity. Whether Arjun can adjust with Riya or not now longer seems necessary. She would go to England with Riya and admit her to a particular school for mentally disabled children like Riya. She would give Arjun a chance to accept Riya as his daughter. If it works, it is fine; if not, she can take care of her child independently. This is her promise to her Riya. It is an ancient promise that every mother makes to her children. It is a kind of old dues that she pays. Janu says:

Somewhere in my distant past, perhaps even a thousand years ago, I had done something that committed to dedicate this life to Riya's care. Had I been a thirsty traveler at her door, and had she taken me in, washed my feet, fed and watered me? I would never know what ancient promise I had made to her, just as she would never what deed had robbed her of words in this life. (160)

Now Janu has made her mind up her mind to fulfill that promise. The novel ends on a happy note. Ancient Promise is a novel that can be prescribed as a sincere effort of Jaishree Misra. It depicts the ups and downs, successes and failures in the heroine's life as she strives to take the reins of her life into her own hands. The novel holds the reader's attention, and curiosity mounts with every page. Even though the story is a type of autobiography, Misra has beautifully portrayed the difficulties a woman has to face in an orthodox family, especially the difficulties of bringing up a child who is mentally disabled without any help and finally breaking away all the obstructions in her life by deciding on her own to face the absolute reality. The central

character of Misra does not go mad or commit suicide, but she goes in search of a better life and finds it. Thus the novel is a journey of the female self from embitterment to empowerment.

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