

Reimagining the New Woman: Marriage, Agency, and Selfhood in Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises*

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Abstract

This research paper examines the restructuring of the New Woman in Jaishree Misra's novel *Ancient Promises* using the intertwining structures of marriage, agency and female selfhood. Set in the socio-cultural context of upper-caste Syrian Christian patriarchy in Kerala, the novel follows Janaki, whose romantic idealism at the start of their life crashes against the curtailing realities of arranged marriage. According to the study, Misra does not only depict a liberated modern woman but he introduces a subject that is negotiating identity in firmly organization structures of familial dominance gendered expectations and marital dominance.

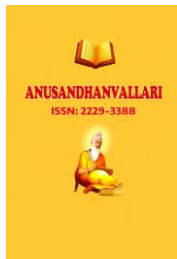
Marriage in the novel serves as some sort of regulatory mechanism radicalizing the feminine desire, mobility, and autonomy, in the sense that it puts the protagonist in a domestic immanence. Nonetheless, the gradual attainment of education, economic and emotional self-expression indicates a moving state toward passive endurance to conscious self-assertion as Janaki discovers. Her change alters the traditional concept of the New Woman being merely Westernized or subversive; instead, it shows a situation-experienced modernity, which is negotiated, as opposed to disrupted.

By anticipating the psychological stress that Janaki will face, maternal predicaments, and ultimate promulgation of personal choice, the paper points out the ways in which selfhood can be formed out of resistance, resilience and tactical adjustment. The New Woman is rejuvenated as the protagonist in the *Ancient Promises* that is not a total break with tradition but a dynamic character that creates identity inside and outside the patriarchal structure. The novel in this way makes a strong contribution towards the present day discussion of Indian feminism by the articulation of a subtle model of female becoming in the changing society.

Keywords: New woman; post-independence; contemporary Indian society, social issues,

Introduction

The New Woman character has continued to be a contentious and variable issue in the feminist literary scene that maintains female self-consciousness, independence, and struggle against the patriarchal regime. The concept continues to get complex in the Indian context where modernity is colliding with the tradition, caste, religion, and family systems. The book *Ancient Promises* by Jaishree Misra (2000) provides an interesting insight to explore such changing feminine subjectivity through the life of its lead character Janaki (Janu). Set in the upper-caste Syrian Christian context of Kerala, the novel is an account of how a young woman changes her



idealistic visions of romantic love and social adherence into a pragmatic self-awareness and agency. In her journey, Misra gets to redefine the New Woman not as a woman of radical uprising but as one who is trying to make terms with the existing patriarchal structures, more specifically the institution of marriage.

The concept of woman as a socially constructed subject could not be more exploitatively expressed than it has been in *The Second Sex* which sees Simone de Beauvoir say famously, one is not born, and becomes, a woman. The formulation put forward by Beauvoir places much emphasis on the act of conditioning, domestication and internalization of women existence by patriarchy. Such conditioning is just what can be seen in the early life of Janaki. Having been trained to appreciate marriage as her key goal of existence, internalized in her belief that a good woman has her role of winning family support and maintaining family harmony, she cannot conceptualize a reason why marriage is so significant to her life. The fact that she never wants to see Arjun again is quickly replaced by the idea of an arranged marriage and how the personal desire can be extinguished at the altar of social correctness.

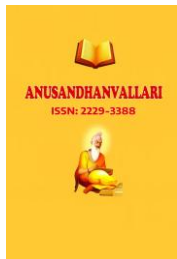
Marriage in *Promises* is a system of control that imposes a state of the so-called immanence, a state of being trapped by domesticity and repetition, as Beauvoir calls it. The decision to introduce Janaki in the Maraar family undergoes her to the attendants of partially explicit and widespread patriarchal view. Her schooling, her likes and preferences, emotional demands are brought down to nothingness in the presence of the collective power of the joint family. Misra sadly portrays this claustrophobic atmosphere when Janaki thinks of her invisibility in the home, realizing that her major worth is to be obeyed and have the ability to give birth. The load of raising her daughter Riya diagnosed with developmental difficulties only exacerbates her status because maternal responsibility is not only a load but also a place of emotional awakening.

Indian feminist critics, including Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, in their masterpiece work *Recasting Women*, can be cited as believing the construction of womanhood in India to have had a long-standing relationship with the preservation of the community and tradition. This conflict of personal desire and social norm is echoed in the story of Misra. The pain of being neglected, sidelined intellectually, and denied companionship are the issues that make Janaki suffer but in ways of a patriarchal control typical of a respectable household. In this way, the novel extends the topic of violence based on psychological confinement and silence.

Nevertheless, on the path of life, Janaki does not end in passive resignation. The turning point is a turning point when she decides to get her higher education in England. Education turns into the tool of change, which provides economic self-reliance and intellectual self-assurance. In this regard her development is echoed in the refiguring of the New Woman of the late twentieth century in India that has been conditioned by liberalization, movement of the people, and the changes in gender expectations. But Misra does not make emancipation a touching break with the past. The fact that Janaki is fighting to get her daughter back shows the long standing snarls of motherhood, laws and patriarchy. Her agency is not absolute but negotiated; it is produced through insistence, self-reflection and strategic resistance.

The agency concept in postcolonial feminist philosophy tends to oppose the dichotomies of victim and liberation. In their work to homogenize women of the third world, scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty warn that women may not be just the passive recipients of the turbulence. Rather, they recommend that one acknowledges context-specific resistance. Such modernity negotiated is Janaki. She is not entirely denying her ethnic background or blindly ceding to it. Rather, she reinvents herself by reinventing love, marriage and motherhood the way she sees it.

Thus, the involvement of the *Ancient Promises* in a wider literary trend, which challenges domestic patriarchy but prefigures female subjectivity. However, in contrast to the Victorian New Woman who was viewed as the embodiment of sexual independence and the desire to make a splash, Misra has endowed her New Woman with emotional strength, empowered by education, and has the confidence to demand legal and personal

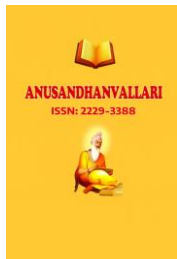


autonomy. According to the novel, contradictions and not complete elimination are the states of becoming a new woman in modern India.

The paper, thus, examines the role of marriage as a disciplinary regime, the development of agency in context of education and mothering dedication as well as the reconstruction of selfhood by lived experience. The paper places the development of Janaki in the context of the feminist theories in the argument that Misra reinvents the New Woman as one of negotiated empowerment, not a rebellious figure at all, but a person who makes assertions about herself in the long run. By so doing, *Ancient Promises* is a valuable addition to the Indian feminist fiction because it psycho-politically formulates a fine politics of female becoming in a medium society.

No one can disagree with the fact that literature has always been instrumental in examining these changes that have been diverse over the centuries. In their novels, such writers as Jaishree Misra interests and bothers to describe the modern Indian society in its state. The characters which include Janu, Suresh, Arjun, Maraars and her parents represent the typical manners and mind of the people living in the current society. In her novel, Misra portrays the various aspects of Indian women. Her women characters are of her real identity- of the creature that she is. They are not just telling the stories but they are perceived to be the mouthpiece of the author. She knows the modern society more and she is blessed with the underbelly of life. She has also sometimes borrowed the factual events in her life and transformed them to suit her needs. Next to hitting the note of originality, Misra looks at her life and people. Overall, her writing style is evident in terms of clarity, subjectivity and precision. Her characters and events are borrowed in general areas and everyday experiences. As an illustration, she employs straightforward and plain adjectives to pull off her female character Janu as young, vulnerable, miserable and strong. She states: "I do not still believe it is the work of fiction to attempt to reveal whatever the writer themselves believes or carries some sort of social agenda but it is very hard as a writer to resist the tendency (or the temptation) to think that they can change the world or at least change the minds of people in some way through the writing besides, my own feminism has been growing with my novels so yes, I have been tempted to use my characters to make women realize that they do not necessarily have to take the sort of oppression that has become so much a part of the norm (Vinai and H Through her works, she intends to send messages to her readers and introduces the wretchedness and dissatisfaction of the New Woman of 21th century. She is a genius indeed and she is unique in her argument on equality between genders. Her everlasting contribution in the subject of Indian English literature is all about modernity and has prospective nature. She is undoubtedly not the only, but one of the greatest novelists of the contemporary Indian English literary world.

The key concepts developed in her first literary work caused in her *Ancient Promises* (2000) rest on gender discrimination, neglect, socio-cultural turmoil, relation of sex and the family structure. The main character of the novel is Janu (Janaki). the girl is brought up and born in Delhi in the modern age. She has been entered into the Irish school of convent so that she can speak the English language at fluent level so that she will have an added advantage in the advanced society of Delhi. Despite this, she is supposed to keep herself apart with her male friends. This implies that the discrimination of the basis of the gender begins at our very own family. According to her mother, we do not represent such a family who can go ahead to invite their girls to have boyfriends (26). Janu told by her mother: The reputations of the family were popularized on the shoulders of the female child and the parents of boys did not need to consider such a thing as a pregnancy (46-47). Once again, the society attempts to incarcerate and suppress the liberties of women by caging them within some stereotypes of the past under the pretext of responsibility. Parents of Janu are in need of getting her job accomplished by marrying her off at an early age. Janu desires to postpone this marriage so that she may have more time in achieving her studies. She shows her outrage and disappointment with the words: I am not ready to marry. I will be glad to attend college here (54). The response that she receives in her turn is quite appalling because her mother replies:

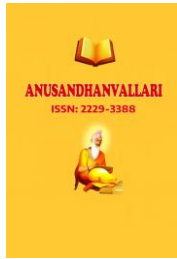


Why? So you can spend more of your father's hard-earned money playing being busy acting like you are in college as you go hiking all about town with boys? (54). Interestingly, the way her mother supports her in a course of her action is relevant and she says that she thinks it is easier to adapt to the new circumstances when one is younger (61). Later on, she will marry in a very prosperous business family since the Maraars are after a fair girl and that too one who is unable to afford a lot of money (53). The fact that Suresh, who is the groom, narrates in detail on the type of girl he wanted to be married to is quite important.

This woman character in the novel Janu is considered to be an extremely fortunate girl to get even a marriage proposal by such wonderful family as it is (54) and no one perceives the social hurdles placed in her way. It happens that later it is a loveless and unsuccessful marriage. To make it get a second chance, Janu chooses to expand her family. She produces a female offspring who happened to be girl number four and certainly no designation to boast of, as far as the Maraars were concerned, (119) to them. It gets even worse when she obtains an information that her daughter Riya is mentally handicapped. It is due to this reason that her own father and grandparents could not love Riya easily (214). Janu begins realizing that the role of a married woman is no better than an unpaid servant or a slave. She realized that being in a relationship with an unfulfilled and unsuccessful marriage was better off being alone. To overcome the issues, she chooses: to finish my BA and obtain a job, that would allow me to be occupied (113). Definitely, she is not a type of a girl who rejects her destiny and passively takes her destiny. She is a real representative of the contemporary age woman who is talkative, self-assured, self-reliant and acts upon things. Janu chooses to fix this mess by divorcing Suresh because she was aware that she is supposed to be happy and live the normal peaceful life. Suresh has not neglected to make her life even more difficult as Janu puts it, he began to attempt to convince everybody that I was mentally ill! People sympathizing with a wife who was mad was better than the embarrassment about having a wife who was not mad and yet had chosen to leave him (225). Even after years of trouble she manages to get out of the loveless marriage and even to become independent. By regaining her identity, not only does she enhance her own life and sufferings are also mitigated by the other people who are related to her and most of all the Riya, the twice-victimized daughter. She takes her to England in order to enroll her (Riya) to any special school and live as normal as possible. Women, according to this famous economist Amartya Sen, are not, in more general view, passive receivers of welfare enhancing assistance provided to them by society, but are proactive agents and facilitators of social change. These changes, of course, affect other lives and well-beings of women, yet those of men and all children boys and girls alike (Sen 222). Previously, the traditional definition of womanhood is stretched up to the four walls of their households, they could not represent their own rights, they always were viewed as inferior in all aspects and they did not receive enough opportunities, like their male counterparts. The women in the past were not bold, therefore, unlike the women of today who are bold, liberated and more expressive. Therefore, Misra in her creative writing sets the firm framework in place, over which gender equality has long yearned. Her novel tries to redefine the new trends within the Indian society called new womanhood. It concerns women across all age categories of the Indian community members. Basically, women at large.

Conclusion

The advent of the New Woman in modern Indian fiction is an indication of a progressive but striking change in gender consciousness. With the Indian society undergoing some social, educational, and legal changes under reform, women are becoming more assertive, articulate, and self-assured in bargaining their identities. Nonetheless, the Ancient Promises by Jaishree Misra prove that it is not a linear change, as it is not absolute. The novel, instead of revealing liberation as riveting break with custom, reveals the New Woman as an inception that emerged through hardship, bargaining and inward living in the enslaved environment of the male.



The sorrow of idealism to marriage disappointment and ultimate adverse self-affirmation of Janaki shows that agency can be built by experience, learning and emotional strength. Even though marriage, as a tool of incarceration, fails her initially, it ends up being the place where she realizes herself. Her quest to acquire education and financial freedom validates what Neera Desai and Usha Thakkar state; that education empowers women to enter the realms where they had previously been denied (67). This aspect therefore means that education is not just a source of livelihood, but an accelerator of existential confidence and social mobility.

The New Woman as reinvented in the New *Ancient Promises* is not merely denying the family and tradition, but she reinvents her role in them. The desire to be able to make decisions, demand legal rights, and express her personal uniqueness without being overwhelmed by some hidden destiny is her empowerment. The transformation is further enhanced by constitutional proclaims of equality and spreads of educational opportunities, but structural inequalities remain.

In the end, according to the novel, this development of the Indian society cannot happen without the independence of women and their involvement. The achievement of a fair social order is pegged on the access to gender education, financial standing and the ability of women to build the selfhood based on their conditions. In the development of Janaki, Misra paints the portrait of the New Woman not as an intangible model but a lived-in negotiated fact that, through its responsiveness, self-identification, and the capacity to make of personal disillusionment a source of empowered emergence.

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