

# The Quest for Selfhood in Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises*

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## ABSTRACT

Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises* reflects the mental psyche of Indian women in modern times. The analysis draws a picture of the woman trying to find a space for herself in a highly discriminative world. Misra clearly portrays domestic violence in this novel. Janaki of *Ancient Promises* represents a new woman who rebels against the patriarchal society by breaking the old traditions and beliefs. Here, Janu suffers a lot to attain her female self. The paper asserts that every woman has an inner self to be exposed.

**Key Words:** Discriminative world, Domestic violence, Patriarchal society, Female self

Jaishree Misra, a prominent writer in English literature is the great-niece of late Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, who was a famous Malayalam writer. She has worked for several years in the Child Care Development of Social Services in Buckinghamshire. She has also worked as a film classifier at the British Board of Film Classification in London, England. She was born in New Delhi to a Malayali family in 1961. In 2000 she started her writing career. All her novels give awareness to the people, particularly women. Her first novel *Ancient Promises* is a sensitive account of a girl's efforts to find her destination in life. Here, Janu faces numerous problems to achieve her goals. This novel has a semi-autobiographical touch. Misra is almost like Janu and she also suffers a lot in her married life.

All her protagonists are women. Misra's novels deal not only with female sufferings but also with how their children are influenced by their suffering. She makes efforts to give solutions to many problems. In her novels, she tries to teach the value of family life to the readers. Misra has relentlessly campaigned for women to abandon their inferiority complex and to be proud of being born as a woman. Misra asserts every woman has an inner female self within them. The only thing that women can do is to reveal their real selves to others.

Jaishree Misra offers real-life situations, and her characters are real human beings. Their path to achieve success is not a flower bed but a thorny path filled with various obstacles. Only by overcoming all these hindrances Misra's women achieve freedom in the real sense. She wants the woman to be always proud.

Misra's protagonists are educated women; they live independently. She is not against the institution of marriage, but she intensely reveals her desire for a successful marital relationship.

Jaishree Mishra's novel *Ancient Promises* is a typical example of the universal way of how women are treated in an ordinary Indian family. The birth of a boy is preferred to that of a girl.

The role of men and women is determined by society. It has various conventions and laws which are not meant to break. A girl has a lot of restrictions at the same time the boy has none. Indian society gives more importance to caste, religious practices, and values. "The reputations of families were carried on the shoulders of their daughters" (46-47). As per these traditions, a woman has to go to her husband's home and her status changes from a 'woman' to a 'wife' and later to a 'mother'. Marriage is the most important event in everybody's life. When a girl shifts to her husband's home, her mind is filled with lots of dreams and expectations. Like every other girl, Janu is also expects a lot from her husband. But on the wedding day, she has realizes that her marriage is a failure.

The novel begins with the statement "My marriage ended today" (Misra, *Ancient Promises* 3). The novel discusses how Indian parents fail to understand their children. Parents of teenage girls are anxious about their children's marriage. After marriage, the girl's parents do not involve in their daughters' family issues. Thus marriage becomes a sharp weapon in the hands of certain men in controlling and suppressing women.

Janu, the protagonist of the novel *Ancient promises* is a girl brought up in Delhi but having strong familial roots in Kerala. She was forced into a marriage by her parents, after they got to know that she was in love with a Delhi boy who is of the same age. Janu's father was totally against the idea of a love marriage. According to him, the main cause for unsuccessful marriages is falling in love. Janu is more curious about her parents at the same time she takes care in keeping things secretive.

In India, marriage is considered a sacred institution. Janu's parents give more importance to the tradition and culture of their society. It was unimaginable for them that their daughter herself decides her life partner. Both Janu's parents left the most important decision of their life to be taken by their parents. They expected the same from their daughter too. They give more importance to beliefs and values. They were unable to understand Janu's world.

Janu is deprived of her right to education. She had to sacrifice her dreams of educating herself and flying like a free bird. She was forced to forget her love and marry the man; her parents choose for her. Though they have promised to continue her education even after marriage, it stays out to be like a line drawn in water. After marriage Janu's world was doomed by a mother-in-law, overbearing sisters-in-law, a reticent father-in-law, and a husband with a weapon of escapism. Her husband is not good nor bad but an expert in the art of escapism.

Janu was never accepted in the Maarar family. She was always a fashionable city type outsider not schooled in Kerala ways. Suresh, Janu's husband was always occupied in business. Janu thus fights a lonely battle against her in-laws. Sometimes Suresh happened to witness some of those insults poured on Janu, but he stays mute.

As she was born and brought up in Delhi, she was not fluent in Malayalam. In her usual manner, so many English words slip out unknowingly. This causes resentment with the mother-in-law. The courteous exchange of 'please' and 'thank you' in return for every dialogue result in getting her being verbally slapped by her mother-in-law. She said , "Look, you're not in Delhi anymore. Like it or not , you are now live in kerala. So I suggest you drop all these fashionable 'Pleases' and 'Thank Yous'. Here we don't believe in unnecessary style (80)".

Janu hopes that if a boy child is born to her, she would get more acceptance in the Maarar family. But much to her disappointment she gives birth to a girl child that too with a mental disability. She realizes that Riya will never provide the key to the Maarar family. While Janu struggled to survive her in marital status and bringing up a child with a disability, she understands

that education is the only escape route in her life. She educates herself and finally on one of her trips to Delhi for a scholarship, she comes across her adolescent lover Arjun. She walks into his arms and adultery without any regrets as if it was the most natural act. Empowered by Arjun's love she finally fights the society's resistance to change. She breaks all the restrictions of the family and walks out as a free woman. Janu returns from London, a world where women have the right to decide their life.

During Janu's school days, Janu meets Arjun in the company of her classmate Leena. Then they became close friends. She is not sure about the concept of love at this tender age. Janu spent her time always with Arjun, without considering her family. Janu and Arjun find Charminar as their secret place of meeting. There they weave their new life with full of happiness. But soon she is found by her parents and they lose their trust in her. She is taken to Kerala and her wish to continue her education is not fulfilled. Parents give more importance to moral values than her education. During her visit to Kerala Maheswari Maraar comes with a proposal. She couldn't resent her parents. The members of her family decided to fix her marriage with Suresh. Janu realises the hard truth that she is going to lose Arjun forever. "A sonorous drumbeat took up in her head ; Don't trip don't fall don't go and ruin it all, Don't cry don't say I should not be here at all" (73).

Janu's marriage with Suresh becomes monotonous. She feels alone in a crowd. Nobody gives solace to her. The indifferent behaviour of her husband makes her feels that she is his private property. So, he controls her speech, mobility, and indirectly her identity. Suresh considers his wife only as a homemaker. Thus, Janu becomes irrelevant and silent in the Maarar household. There comes a disharmony with the members of his family. She gets frustrated and depressed. A girl like Janu with the modern concept completely felt like the fish out of water.

In conclusion, though Jaishree Misra does not give any alternative solution to the problems that are faced by Indian women, the final decision of her novel presents some hope to the readers. "Tomorrow, the next chapter would begin" (305). Misra is trying to provide some awareness for women through her novels. The author has not written the novel in a feminist tone. She is not against marriages. She claims for equal rights and positions between husband and wife. The author shows how the woman is suppressed in the post-independent era. Janu is a representative of thousands of women who aspire for freedom. Instead of being a silent wife in the family, Janu fights against the orthodoxy of the family. She proves that through strong willpower and education any woman can decide her future. In this novel, Jaishree Misra is intensely aspiring to create an equal place between husband and wife. She has added an Autobiographical touch to this novel. The minute details of Janu are reflected throughout the novel. Janu's fight is not against men but the patriarchal and suppressing nature of society. Janu doesn't want to be with a fake identity as a silent wife of Suresh. She finds more solace in getting Arjun as her husband. Arjun plays a significant role in making her stand self-reliant. He becomes an inspiration in building a new life. The novel ends on an optimistic note. Janaki in turn becomes the spokesperson as well as an inspiration for the womenfolk.

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