

ISSN : 2454-3365

THE LITERARY HERALD

AN INTERNATIONAL REFEREED ENGLISH E-JOURNAL

A Quarterly Indexed Open-access Online JOURNAL

Vol.1, No.1 (June 2015)

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SUBVERSION OF THE 'INDIAN WOMAN' MYTH IN JAISHREE MISHRA'S *ANCIENT PROMISES*: A CRITICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The paper tries to analyse how the novel *Ancient Promises* written by contemporary writer Jaishree Misra proves to be an aberration from the representation of Indian woman in Indian English Literature. The novel's attempt to portray the 'disguised' life of a middle class Indian woman is studied. The character Janu in the novel is considered as an example of 'new woman' who resists the dual moral standards in the hostile environment she lives. The conflicts faced by Janu who is a member of a conservative Malayali family who had to get married off at a very early age is analysed as a fight against the tradition which questions her individuality. The paper includes the arguments laid by Simon De Beauvoir in "The Second Sex" and Susan Gubar and Sandra.M.Gilbert's "Madwoman in the Attic".

KEYWORDS

Subversion, Myth, Indian Woman, Indian English Fiction

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Jaishree Misra is a popular Indian English author. She was born in Delhi to Malayali parents. She moved to England and is now currently settled in Trivandrum, Kerala. Her debut novel *Ancient Promises* was a best seller in India. Her novels fall into the categories of love stories, suspense fiction, historical novels etc. The novel *Rani* based on the life of Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi was banned by Uttar Pradesh State Government. Her novels mostly deal with the theme of the struggle of middle class Indian woman for survival. The novels also infuse a criticism on the system of arranged marriages in India. Other novels include *Accidents like Love and Marriage*, *Secrets and Sins*, *Secrets and Lies*, *A Scandalous Secret* (trilogy), *Afterwards* etc. Jaishree Misra is also known as the great niece of the late Thakazhi Shivashankarappillai, Jnanpith awardee.

The novel which is selected as the case study in the paper is Misra's first novel *Ancient Promises*. The novel is supposedly an autobiographical one. The protagonist of the novel Janu seems to have many similarities with that of the life of Misra. Jaishree, like Janu was a girl born and bought up in Delhi and married to a conservative family in Kerala. The relationship was not a successful one. Janu towards the end of the novel marries her lover Arjun Mehta and they live with her differently abled daughter Riya like Jaishree who lives with her husband Sudeep Mishra and her differently abled daughter Rohini. "I married my Arjun eventually and Riya, happily lives with us" (Misra 308). Misra herself admits that the novel is a thinly veiled autobiography (qtd. in Umashankar 2).

The protagonist of the novel Janu (Janaki) is not the confined Indian housewife or mother who easily fits into the colonialist national project. *Ancient Promises* is an example of the novel created by the empowered women writers in India as Dr B.V.V Padmavathy puts it,

Tradition, transition and modernity are the stages through which the woman in Indo-Anglian novel is passing. The image of traditional woman, the Sita Savitri type, was at once, easy and popular....In India, with its strong bent for tradition, woman was expected mainly to live for others than for herself because "others" controlled and moulded the social structure. Even woman in life and literature herself voluntarily surrendered to the ideal of self sacrifice...Modern woman, in life, has been trying to throw off the burden of inhibitions she has carried for ages. Yet, a woman on way [sic] to liberation, trying to be free from inhibitions, is rarely seen in Indo-Anglian literature. (29)

The beginning line of the novel itself points to the startling realities to which the novel deals with. "My marriage ended today" (Misra 3) gives a tone of pessimism indicating the clash between the individual and traditions in society. The divorce which Janu talks of is something she has never seen in her family. She feels the responsibility and burden society has given to "a divorcee with a child" through the heaviness she felt while holding Riya. Janaki (Janu) is the only child of a middle class conservative Nair family. She was bought up in Delhi amidst a number of 'don't-dos' as she was not supposed to follow the Delhi way but the Kerala way. Janu studied in a girls' only school where her flirtatious friend Leena's affair with Jai makes Janu befriend with Arjun, a local cricket hero in the neighbouring school. Completely aware of the chaos going to be created, Janu falls in love with Arjun. "A heart smitten with love thus avoids many disappointments: if the loved one's behavior is capricious, her remarks stupid, then the mystery serves to excuse it all" (Beauvoir 1409). Their sneaky meetings and feelings however do not sideline the relationship as a 'teenage fascination'. The author presents the relationship in a very serious and mature colour to the reader. The meetings come to an end when it was once discovered by her parents. Janu just after her 18th birthday while in her summer vacation in Kerala was married off to a wealthy snobbish family in Kerala, the Maraars. She had no other choice but to accept as it was considered to be a lottery for her by others and a prestige issue for her parents, "What are they going to think? They could even retract their offer by tomorrow!" "Be grateful for what you're getting." "They don't even want a dowry ... It's nothing less than arrogance to say no to people like that" (Misra 61). There, dowry is seen as something which is otherwise essential and important which is avoided only because the Maraars were too good. Arjun was forced to be brushed aside in Janu's heart as he was a wrong choice (non Malayali) who happened to enter into her life at a wrong time in a wrong age (both of them were young). Janu writes to Arjun who was then in England to do his graduation,

...because, because, because 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...your world and mine have grown so far apart, I reckon I've lost you anyway. And maybe I'll find some comfort in making my folks happy, for once. (63)

The stereotypic ending of Indian love stories is what the author presents through the words in the highlighted use of the terms 'family' and 'happiness'. The individuality and identity of a woman is buried off by marrying her at an age when she keenly wishes to object it and pursue her education. Janu thus becomes the 'girl' of the family who increased their social status by accepting the 'alliance'. Mishra gives a humorous description on the patriarchal system of *pennukaanal* (seeing the bride) and the formalities associated with the system;

He asked if I knew how to cook and what sort of food I liked. He asked me if I'd like him to ask him any questions, to which I said no thank you. Ma said later this was also good because it would have seemed quite forward of me to have asked him a lot of questions. Without intending to, I was passing my *pennukaanal* with flying colours. (59)

Janu was a fitting choice to Suresh as she was pretty, young (so that she would adjust), spoke English well and nothing else was noted as "too important" (96) which were not particularly useful or desirable to the rest of the family. She had to continuously bear alienations which often came in the form of "Look, you are not in Delhi anymore". Janu always tried to keep in mind her Ma's instructions before wedding which included warnings not to wander in nighties, wake up early and having bath as soon as getting up, "oh dear, my first words and they'd turned out to be a lie" (78). Jaishree's portrayal of Janu makes it clear how much disguised an Indian woman's life is for the mission of making her accepted in the society. The situation in Suresh's home makes Janu feel completely alienated. The care and love grandchildren receive from her mother in law makes Janu remove her Copper-T and envisage motherhood as a distant light in a tunnel. She hopes that a baby would make everything alright than a B.A degree. She gives birth to Riya. Though things do not change in the attitude of Maraars to Janu, Riya becomes the support and Constance in her dried life as she puts it, "my Transformer of Bad things to Good. My potential Best friend" (Misra 116). Motherhood is presented as an escape for Janu from the stark realities in her life. "Culture undeniably has delineated the concept of motherhood as the most important aspect of being a woman yet Indian women have experienced both deification and defilement in varying degrees" (Sistla 9). Janu puts on it;

Somewhere in the distant past, perhaps even a thousand years ago, I'd done something that committed me to dedicating 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 know what deed had robbed her words in this life. Or how that would be compensated for in the next. But, somewhere along the way, we had both lived many lives that linked us together now. (Misra 160)

Things take another turn when Janu realizes that Riya is 'mentally handicapped'. The novel also unveils the reality in how the differently abled children are treated by the society through the perspective of a mother.

I needed to put as much distance as I could between us and that horribly normal world back there, where children could paint purple mountains and sing the

national anthem and count from ten backwards. There would never ever be room for us there. (141)

Riya as Janu expected never became her mother in law's darling grandchild either. Janu foresees her predicament in the world where she is stuck with a mentally handicapped child without even a B.A. She decides to pursue her studies. Thereafter Janu liberated her from the ties of the 'daughter in law conventions' of Maraar family and started planning for her escape.

My struggle was over. I grabbed at the realization with a weary but dizzy, almost overwhelming sense of liberation. I was free. I neither had to struggle for their approval any more, nor put Riya through the same hopeless loop...I was soon going to become the thorn in the Maraar side" (Misra 132).

Janu became the rebel in home fighting for Riya and for herself raising her voice against the patriarchies in the Maraars' House. "Like it or not, Riya isn't one of Sathi's love-birds that can be caged for life. Either she goes...or neither of us does" (Misra 133). The author here portrays the transformation of a woman who was completely under the confinements of patriarchy and kept losing. Misra through Janu intends to employ a portrait of the new woman where 'motherhood' is used as the potential weapon.

The new woman refuses to be stifled under oppressive restrictions. Feminism intends to rebel against the hostile environment in which a woman is forced to live. It is the struggle against the hardships, neglect and dual moral standards to which women are subjected. The new woman's demand for her rightful place, recognition and respect due to her is prompted by an inner urge to make her, existence a meaningful one. (Sree 32)

Riya was admitted to a special school. The further possibilities of sending Riya to a special school abroad made Janu think of doing a course in special education herself, thus sketching an escape map from the Maraars. She was called for interview for a scholarship in Delhi which changed her life. Having met Arjun, her love after a long time; Janu decides to go for a divorce and walk in to the world of Arjun with Ria through the scholarship from University of London. She confesses her plans to Suresh as they were "like prisoners". What proceeded was a complicated storyline where Janu was preferred by her in-laws to be mad rather than being someone who leaves her husband, "he was trying to convince everyone I was mentally ill! It was preferable to have people sympathize over a wife who was mad than to bear the shame of one who wasn't mad but wanted to leave him! (225) This can be read connecting to what Sandra.M.Gilbert and Susan Gubar say in "The Madwoman in the Attic",

Such diseases are caused by patriarchal socialization in several ways. Most obviously, of course, any young girl, but especially a lively or imaginative one, is likely to experience her education in docility, submissiveness, selflessness as in some sense Sickening. To be trained in renunciation is almost necessarily to be trained to ill health. (2030)

After a complicated drama which would have drowned her down into the world of depression, she escapes with the support of her mother and grandmother (two 'weak' women). She completes her education in London and gets the much 'unpleasant' divorce all the time with the moral support of Arjun. The novel ends with the scene in courtroom and is open ended as it does not suggest that Janu goes with or to Arjun. The author concludes the novel stating, "tomorrow, the next chapter would begin" (305).

The protagonist was betrayed by the conventional Hera image but tasted the final triumph of the individual will with the image of the strong Demeter and Persephone (S 9). The

differences Janu points out in the revelation of the relationship in Janu's and Arjun's homes making it 'nothing' for Arjun as her Maa says, "these things were always less worrying for boys' families" (Misra 46), women in the Maraar household talking against matrilineal system as it seemed 'rubbish' (215), 'education' working as the major influence for liberating Janu who was denied it in the name of marriage might suggest the reader that *Ancient Promises* as a feminist novel. In addition to that, it was two 'weak women' who strongly supported Janu in her depressing times. Janu also leaves the novel in an auto rickshaw with her daughter, mother and grandmother (without any man). Janu performs according to the myth created by the patriarchy in the beginning including the minute instructions by her mother to wash her hair whenever taking a bath, the appreciation for skipping the hobby 'drama' while enlisting her hobbies in the 'pennukanal' etc.

to be a "true woman" she must accept herself as the Other. The men of today show a certain duplicity of attitude which is painfully lacerating to women; they are willing on the whole to accept woman as a fellow being, an equal; but they still require her to remain the inessential. For her these two destinies are incompatible; she hesitates between one and the other without being exactly adapted to either, and from this comes her lack of equilibrium. (Beauvoir 1411)

Janu and Riya create a sensitive reader. Misra's writing is at the same time bold and touching. Though Misra shakes off the tags of 'feminist' and 'woman writing' in the novel, the semi autobiographical element evident conceives against it. In the second reading, it is Arjun and his love which liberates Janu from her alien world at the Maraars (Umashankar 11). There, a woman's inability to live alone and take independent decisions is what is being depicted. Janu can be seen as an admirable rebel who fought against the patriarchy which imprisoned her. The novel stands as an excellent example of contemporary women writings in Indian English Literature.

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