

## **The Female Self in Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises and Afterwards***

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### **Abstract**

The article envisions the study of women subaltern in the two novels *Ancient promises* and *Afterwards* of the famous novelist Jaishree Misra. In doing so these novels can be understood as an indictment on the oppressive patriarchal culture of Kerala during the twentieth century and to an extent that exists till date. The analysis draws an awful picture of the women trying to find a space for herself in the highly discriminative world. Simone de Beauvoir rightly puts it up as “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman...she remains a vassal, imprisoned in her condition”. In India the bias against women is very common which led to the evolution of feminism and feministic movements. A boy child is preferred at home to a girl child so, not just to women even to an infant girl the society shows its meanness. Women fall victim to discrimination over their pay, job, education and welfare. Most women are made financially dependent on men. Their duty is to look after the children and household. Domestic violence gets a clear depict in the novels, *Ancient Promises* and *Afterwards* of Jaishree Misra. It is believed that women have always been under the oppressive clutches of men, that this oppression has its origin deep in the human psychology and that this suffering is not new but the same old story that has been passing on ever since the human life began.

**Key words:** Subaltern, Oppression, Patriarchy, Domestic violence, Women psyche, Women struggle and existence.

### **Full paper**

“At no period of life, in no condition of society, should a woman do anything at her mere pleasure. Their fathers, their husbands, their sons are verily called her protectors; but it is such protection! Day and night must women be held by their protectors in a state of absolute dependence. A woman, it is affirmed, is never fit for independence or it be trusted with liberty”. (Massie, 153)

In India, like all other countries around the globe, violence against women occurs daily. The patriarchal nature of ancient Indian society has led to very different expectations on the behavior of women than that of men. A man is often judged by the way he administers the world outside his home, whereas the ability of a woman is measured by looking on to her capability of keeping the indoors and obeying her husband. Women are always under the clutches of male oppression. They are their father’s property till they are married and after which they becomes the possessions of their husbands .Prem Choudhary rightly points out “One of the dominant images of woman that has survived through history is that of the chaste woman, it continues to gain popularity especially in popular cultural forms which project this image as quintessentially that of an Indian women and as an intrinsic part of Indian culture” (Choudhary, 110 – 111).

Tracing back to early literature, the early epic tale of Ramayana reverberate the notions of sex appropriate behaviors by presenting its female characters with attributes that are in sheer contrast to the characteristic of their male counterpart. Lord Rama tells his mother “A woman attains the highest heaven merely by serving her husband... with her only interest the welfare of her husband, a woman should constantly serve him- this has been the dharma of women from ancient times, this is what the Vedas and the smritis say”(qtd in Chaithanya, 180).

In the Indian context family plays a vital role in creating a hierarchical system of the society, as it not only mirrors the order in the state and educates its children but also creates and continuously reinforces that order. Boys are taught to be dominating and aggressive and girls are expected to be caring, loving and submissive. These stereotypes of masculinity and femininity are not only social built-ups but also have been imbibed by both men and women. Man is credited as the bread winner of the family because the earning of money and going for work is mainly his job, whereas the women are supposed to do menial jobs and look after the children and other members of the family. It is because of these gender stereotypes the women are at a disadvantage and are vulnerable to violence and other kinds: discriminations and injustices.

Simone de Beauvoir talks about making women as the other. It is the ovaries and uterus of a woman that imprisons her freedom. Life of a woman is within the clutches of a man. Woman is always made dependent on man. The two sexes have never shared the world in equality. Though there are laws to give equal opportunities to women it is never practiced anywhere. Even in the economic sphere men and women are at a great difference, men holds more opportunities in the office. When man makes women the other, he may then be expecting to assert power over her. Beauvoir’s arguments regarding “women as the other” runs parallel to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s categorization of women as a “subaltern”. Subaltern is a person or a group of people that have been excluded from the society. Subaltern women is the most suffered ones among the lot, they find their space on the extreme end of the spectrum of the

marginalized, to the extent that oppression as a routine is more familiar to them than subaltern men. All their tales of struggle for recognition go largely unheard.

Jaishree Misra sets her novel in the contemporary socio-cultural milieu of Kerala. Misra has an innate ability to intermesh gender and disability. She has succeeded in sketching the life trajectories of the protagonists in her novels *Afterwards* and *Ancient Promises* as a reflection of the prejudices prevalent in our society. The novels provide us a potent analysis of the social life in modern Kerala, a society where woman hood is considered a disability. Androcentric attitude involved in family and marital relationship of modern Kerala gets a clear note in the novel. The novel reflects the psyche of the Indian women of the modern times and their struggles to shackle the tyrannical hand cuffs the patriarchal society exerts on them.

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 her same age. Janu's father was totally against the idea of love marriage.

In Kerala, marriage is considered as a sacred institution. For the parents of the bride it is the promised end. Janu's parents were more entrenched into the traditions and culture of their society. They confined themselves to a traditional bound society. It was unbelievable for them that their daughter is deciding by herself on whom she should marry. Both Janu's parents left the most important decisions of their life to be taken by their parents. They expected the same from their daughter also. Janu's parents had preconceived beliefs and values. They were unable to understand Janu's world.

Maya of *Afterwards* also go through the same situation. Her love affair was unacceptable to her parents, so when her parents receive an alliance for her from a rich business man Maya was forced to quit her education and marry Mr Govind. Maya's parents believed she will get adjusted to the new life soon but on the contrary Govind's material possessions couldn't fetch her happiness. Govind was so possessive and suspicious in such a way that she was never allowed to go out for shopping, make friends, continue her studies or at least visit her parents occasionally. The only friend she has is her maid Kathu. Maya was expected to obey her husband. She was made financially dependent on him. For Govind educated Maya was a possession similar to his luxurious car and big house. Maya sarcastically comments "but once he got me, he didn't know what on earth to do with me!"(56). So she was nicely put in a golden cage. Neither her parents were ready to rescue her from there,"but what they want to see is that I live in a nice house, have a nice car, a husband who gives me everything. They don't want to see the other side of that" (55). Obviously what mattered them more was to keep the marital status of their daughter intact than Maya's happiness.

Both Janu and Maya are deprived of their right to education. They had to sacrifice their dreams of educating themselves and to fly as free birds. They were forced to forget their lovers and marry the man their parents choose for them. Though both were promised to continue their education even after marriage, it stays out to be like a line drawn in water.

After marriage Janu's world was a domineering mother in law, over bearing sisters in law, a reticent father in law and a husband with a weapon of escapism. For Maya's world

shrank into an over possessive and suspicious husband. Janu was never accepted in the Maarar family. She was always a fashionable city type outsider not schooled in the Kerala ways. Suresh, Janu's husband was always occupied in business. Janu thus fought a lonely battle against her in laws veiled mocking that tore her self-esteem. Though sometimes Suresh happened to witness some of those insults poured on Janu, he seemed to stay silent. Janu hops 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 her the key to the Maarar family. While Janu struggled to survive her marriage and bringing up a child with disability. She understood 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 interview to fund her education abroad she comes across her adolescent lover Arjun. She walks into his arms and into adultery without any regrets as if it was the most natural act. Embodied and empowered by Arjun's love she finally fights the society's resistance to change. She breaks the handcuffs the society tied on her and walks out as a free woman. Janu returns from London, a world where women have their own right to decide their life as against the women of her own society, for whom the concept of a better life is an alien.

Janu gets the full support of her mother and grandmother to fight against Suresh and his family. Maya's parents are very well aware of her sufferings, yet they stay quiet. For them happiness was to see their daughter still married to a man with a car and a big house and the belief that she is with a husband who provides her with everything. So she comes to the conclusion that Rahul Tiwari, an NRI who came to Kerala to learn Mridangam and stays in Maya's neighborhood will provide her the key to escape from the suspicious Govind. She builds a friendship with Rahul and at the right point she begs him to take her and Anjali with him to Delhi. Maya's escape to Delhi and later to London was seen by her family as elopement which brought shame to the family. Her family as well as the society considers Maya's escape as a severe blow to the dignity of the upper class society. They refuse to answer her calls and conducts her death rites, 'Padi adachu pindam vakkal' which means doing the death rites of a living person for bringing shame onto the family's reputation. They are no longer considered as a family member and is never allowed in the house. That gives Maya more shock to realize that her family would never accept her. Maya who was eagerly waiting for their approval gets a fatal shock. The constant support of Rahul helped both Maya and Anjali live a comfortable life but again fate plays its dark game, when after three years of life together Maya dies of a car accident. The woman who searched for real love, went abroad to fetch her dreams finally return to native as ashes.

Life of Maya and Janu exist between conventions and modernity. Janu was brought up in Delhi and Maya in Bangalore. Both parents insist that their daughters should follow the societal conventions as they feared the social strictures. Janu and Maya who were educated and brought up in cities found it difficult to surrender themselves to the domestic confines. Their stay in the home is depicted by Misra as being forced on them rather than a willingness to stay.

Focusing on the two novels, the interlocking themes that emerge are of sufferings and struggles of women for their emancipation and autonomy in patriarchal society and culture. The novels do not fulfill the stereotypical belief on the roles of a woman. The novel asserts that

women are not mere sexual objects to satisfy the man's needs. The protagonists initially represents the continuity of women's subjection in the patriarchal society and the humiliation and sufferings they undergo because of their confinement in the domestic sphere

Janaki of *Ancient Promises* represents a new woman who rebel against the patriarchal society by breaking the age old traditions and beliefs whereas Maya's life represents conflicts that arise when women try to struggle for independence and self-determination. Misra has tried to highlight the struggles of an Indian new woman who breaks the traditional norms and rebels against the general mindset of the patriarchal society. Her protagonists represents the large group of women who revolts not for equality but for the right to be acknowledged at home and social sphere.

By providing the ability to speak Misra subverts the age old stereotypical beliefs of a woman. She questions those who suppress and ignore the female articulations by giving voice to her protagonists, by making their voice heard out loud to the world around her.

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