

## Portrayal of the New Woman: A Study of Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises*

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### Abstract

Jaishree Misra is an eminent contemporary Indian English writer, whose novel *Ancient Promises* (2000) deals prominently with the condition of women in the contemporary Indian society. The novel begins with the end of marriage of a teenage girl named Janaki (Janu). Janu or Janaki is symbolic of the “new woman” who is not born to suffer the plight by accepting it as destiny but believes in fighting for her independence and individuality. By getting out of the shackles of the unhappy marriage, she not only fulfils her own dream of studying further and living life on her own terms but also brings a ray of hope in the life of her mentally handicapped child Riya. The present paper attempts to explore the way the modern women of Indian society are fighting for their identity, freedom, happiness and rights rather than silently facing suppression and oppression by the hands of the patriarchal society. It also determines the crucial role of women in the formation of the modern nation right after its independence.

**Keywords:** New woman; post-independence; contemporary Indian society, social issues, Indian English writings.

### Introduction

It would be incorrect to assert that the status of Indian women has always been of an inferior being. Many historical accounts tell us about the high esteem positioning of the ancient women. Then, with the passage of time, their status declined. Until recently, the women in Indian society were veiled, enslaved and being totally suppressed. While marching towards the progressive modern society, the long period of oppression and exploitation of the Indian women has reduced. Women have always been overshadowed by the major roles played by their male counterparts. Even if they have accomplished something significant, their contributions are overlooked and are not given any special attention. With the rapid political and social change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, women demand for equality and are ready to rebel against the society if they do not get the same. The contemporary feminist movement is somewhat different from the movement in the early period. Today's writings are fueled not by the lives of women who are behind the veils but who are ready to share their expressions widely. Now, the contemporary women do not believe in silence because they have voice to express their words. New Woman is way more powerful and confident but at the same time, she continues fighting for her rights. As Priyanka Mahajan

mentions in her research paper: “The phrase ‘*new woman*’ was coined originally by Henry James and intended by him to characterize American expatriates living in Europe. Women of affluence and sensitivity exhibited an independent spirit and were accustomed to acting of their own. The socio-political and economic forces brought about awareness in women who took up the new roles in the social, political and economic life” (Mahajan 200). By social and cultural convention, women have to fight for their inordinate ambitions with all their powers in the male dominated society. There are writers who have created some of the very fascinating women characters who are the perfect example of the self-awakened New Woman. The Norwegian playwright Henrick Ibsen’s heroine Nora in *A Doll House* (1879) is the true prototype of New Woman who does not believe in patriarchal society. She is not a kind of woman who accepts the suppression and oppression by slamming the door on patriarchy. G.B. Shaw is yet another British novelist who through his character Ann Whitefield in his novel *Man and Superman* (1903) depicts the true meaning of today’s women who do not succumb to the unfavorable circumstances in front of them but achieve what they desire in life. Ann, in the novel, though seems to put her eye on Octavius Robinson but eventually marries Tanner who is more financially secured and has all characteristics of a good husband. There are many other novels which show the slow and steady transformation of the women status in different societies

As literature is considered to be the mirror of the society, it helps in uncovering the subalternity of women in Indian society. There are numerous authors who have given the true account of the condition of women in different times. There are numerous Indian texts which provide us with the narratives of women’s lives and their emancipation. Major authors like Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Shobha De, Kamala Markandaya, Githa Hariharan, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Anita Nair and others have in their writings the central question “what women want?”. They focus their attention in this particular aspect of the society. Likewise, Jaishree Misra is one of the finest contemporary Indian English novelists who is endowed with wider intellectual vision than most of other contemporary writers. Through her world of novels, Misra has reached an astonishing excellence and perfection. She has portrayed a comprehensive picture of contemporary life and realistically epitomized the social, cultural, economic, political and religious conditions of her age. She is endowed with the talent of presenting the reality of the contemporary society upon a great scale. Her novels are the powerful medium for the expression of contemporary social conditions and life. She has made herself the painter of life around her and depicts the social reality through her works. The varied sections of the contemporary Indian society are represented in her men and women characters. Misra reflects the dark underside of the contemporary Indian society and is concerned with the vital issues of the day. She has made casual references of many grave issues in her works but focuses much on the issue of gender inequality. She can be said a social reformer because she not only paints the contemporary life and society of her time but raises question against the social evils.

### **Fight for Individuality**

The nineteenth century was a time of socio-political upheaval in India. Raja Rammohun Roy is usually considered among the first reformers concerned with women’s status. There were other male reformers like Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar, Keshub Chandra Sen, Swami Vivekanand, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Khawaja Altaf Husain Hali, Shaikh Muhammad, Dhondo Keshav

Karve and others who were raising a number of issues related to the plight of women. Later in the century, many efforts were made by different other women scholars who penned down their day-to-day experiences in their memoirs. A Bengali woman wrote a story called *Amar Jiban* ("My Life"), Pandita Ramabai wrote *The High Caste Hindu Woman* and Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain wrote three essays "Ardhangi" ("The Female Half"), "Griha" ("The House"), and Borka" ("The Veil"). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the education for women was introduced. Lord Dalhousie, Governor-General of India from 1848-1856 said "that no single change was likely to produce more important and beneficial consequences than female education" (Forbes 40). The educational experiment helped women getting out of their households and think about their own concerns. For the very first time in India, new clubs and organizations were formed to represent them rightly. Major organizations like the Women's Indian Association (WIA), the National Council of Women in India (NCWI) and the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) were formed for protecting and monitoring the rights of women. With this the fight for women's rights also begun. The demand for the political rights and equality was witnessed. These women were educated and they had realized that the battle for their rights would not be easy. While women struggled to claim their rights, they also participated in the nationalist movement. Progressive women such as Sarojini Naidu, Hansa Mehta, Swarup Rani Nehru, Parvati Devi, Sucheta Kriplani, Aruna Asaf Ali are few amongst many women who sacrificed everything they had for the freedom of their own nation. Women's participation in nationalist movement also shaped the movement for their own rights. Along with gaining respect and identity, their male colleagues also learned about the importance of women's role in building up of one's nation. Even during the colonial period, the revolutionary women of colonial India performed different job roles. They worked as medical professionals, employed in educational fields, as lawyers, in business, factories, mills and various other sectors. In independent India, equality between genders was declared a fundamental right by the Constitution of India. But even after such a long time, the struggle for gender equality still prevails in Indian society. The author Geraldine Forbes quotes in her book: "The most disturbing comment on contemporary Indian society has been made by those economists and demographers who have noted India's differential sex ratio. At the beginning of the century there were 972 females per 1000 males, by 1941 the ratio had fallen to 945 females per 1000 males and it fell even further to 933 females per 1000 males, by 1981" (Forbes 238). She further quotes Amartya Sen who wrote: "We confront here what is clearly one of the most momentous, and neglected, problems facing the world" (Forbes 238). Whereas, according to National Family Health Survey, 2020-21 (NFHS-5) India's sex ratio in 2022 is 1020 females per 1000 males (India Sex Ratio 2022). Hence, the available data itself suggests that the position of women has undoubtedly improved but we still have a long way to go in order to attain gender equality. However, it is a matter of great importance that "new woman" fights for her complete liberation and empowerment rather than resigning herself to her destiny. The discrimination on the ground of gender is not limited to any class, caste, age or race. Misra has tried with utmost sincerity and honesty to represent the exact picture of how women at every stage are treated as inferior to their male-counterparts.

### Power and Powerlessness

There is no denying of the fact that literature has always played the pivotal role in studying these changes which have been varied throughout the centuries. Writers like Jaishree Misra, in her novels, interests and bothers to describe the contemporary Indian society as it exists. The mind and manners of the people living in the present society are well expressed by the characters such as Janu, Suresh, Arjun, Maraars and her parents who are the typical to the time in every way possible. Misra exhibits different facets of Indian women in her novel. Her female characters are about her real identity- the creature that she really is. They are not merely narrating the tales but are seen as the mouthpiece of the author. She has a better understanding of the contemporary society and is endowed with seamy side of life. She has sometimes borrowed the real incidents of her life without change and has reshaped them accordingly. Beside striking the note of originality, Misra turns her eyes to the life and people of her time. Her style of writing is noticeable for clarity, subjectivity and precision. Her characters and incidents are taken from familiar areas and common experiences. For example, she uses direct and simple adjectives to describe her female character Janu as young, vulnerable, miserable but strong. She declares: "I still don't believe that it's the job of fiction to try and expose the novelist's own beliefs or carry any sort of social agenda but, as a writer's profile grows, it becomes quite difficult to ignore the expectation (or temptation) to imagine that one can change the world or at least shift people's attitudes in some way via the writing besides, my own feminism has grown alongside my novels so yes, I have been tempted to use my characters to help women see that they don't necessarily need to take the oppression that has become so much a part of the norm" (Vinai and Hazarika 195). This provides her a unique place in contemporary Indian English novels. With the help of her works, she wants to deliver messages to her readers and presents the misery and discontentment of the "New Woman" of 21<sup>st</sup> century. She is indeed genius and stands alone in claiming equality among gender. Her abiding contribution to Indian English literature is suffused with modernity and has forward looking quality. She is indisputably one of the greatest novelists of contemporary Indian English literary world, if not the only greatest.

The main ideas conceived in her debut novel *Ancient Promises* (2000) are based on gender discrimination, neglect, socio-cultural upheaval, sexual relationship and the family system. Janu (Janaki) is the protagonist of the novel. she is a modern age girl who is born and brought up in Delhi. She has been enrolled in the Irish convent school to speak English fluently so that she gets a head-start in the sophisticated society of Delhi. In spite of this, she is expected to maintain distance from her male friends. This suggests that the discrimination of the basis of gender starts right from our own family. Her mother says: "We aren't the kind of family that can encourage its girls to have boyfriends" (26). Janu's mother sharply etched out: "The reputations of families were carried on the shoulders of their daughters" and "parents of boys didn't have to worry about things like ... (this was her worst fear) ... *pregnancies!*" (46-47). Time and again, society tries to trap and curb the freedom of women by binding them to certain age-old stereotypes in the name of "Responsibility". Janu's parents wants to get her job done by marrying off her at an early age. Janu wants to put this marriage off so that she could get more time to complete her studies. She expresses her anger and dismay through the lines: "I don't feel ready for marriage ... I'm looking forward to going to college here" (54). The answer she gets in return is very shocking as her

mother says: “Why? So that you can waste more of your father’s hard-earned money pretending to go to college while roaming all around town with boys?” (54). It is pertinent to note how her mother justifies her action through the words: “In some ways, I think it’s easier to adjust to new situations when you’re younger” (61). Eventually, she gets married in a very well-to-do business family because the Maraars “quest for a pretty girl, preferably one from a family without *too* much money” (53). It is quite significant how Suresh, the groom, describes in detail the type of girl he wanted for his marriage. He specifies:

1. She had to be pretty.
2. She had to be young so that she would ‘adjust’.
3. She had to be able to speak English well, so that he could take her to Bombay in the hoped-for expansion of his motel business.
4. Nothing else was too important. (96).

Janu is believed to be “an incredibly lucky girl even to get a proposal of marriage from a family as wonderful as that” (54) but nobody sees the social obstacles piled across her path. Later it turns out to be a loveless and unsuccessful marriage. In order to give it a second chance, Janu decides to extend her family. She gives birth to a girl child who was “girl number four, not a particularly special designation by any measure”, (119) for the Maraars. It becomes more nightmarish when she finds that her daughter Riya is mentally handicapped. Because of which Riya’s “own father and grandparents found her difficult to love” (214). Janu starts understanding that a married woman’s place is no more than an unpaid servant or a slave. She knew better that the best escape from this unfulfilled and unsuccessful marriage was to be on her own. In order to combat the problems, she decides: “to complete my BA and get a job, that would keep me busy” (113). Certainly, she isn’t a kind of girl who blames her fate and accepts her plight silently. She is the true symbol of the modern age woman who is vocal, confident, independent and believes in action. Janu decides to get out of this trap by divorcing Suresh as she knew that she deserves to be happy and lead a normal peaceful life. Suresh did not fail in making her life even more tough, as Janu says, he started “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). Even after so much of trouble she not only gets out of the loveless marriage but becomes independent. By gaining back her identity, she not only improves her own life but the other people related to her, especially her doubly-victimized daughter Riya. She brings her to England so that she (Riya) could be enrolled in any special school and lead life as normally as possible. As the renowned economist Amartya Sen states: “Women are, in broader perspective, not passive recipients of welfare-enhancing help brought about by society, but they are active promoters and facilitators of social transformations. Such transformations influence, of course, the lives and well-beings of women, but also those of men and all children – boys as well as girls” (Sen 222). In the past, the conventional image of womanhood is limited to the four walls of their houses, they were not able to speak for their own rights, they were always seen as inferior in every way and they did not get enough opportunities as their male counterparts. Today, the modern women like Janu, are more decisive, liberated



and more expressive than the women of the past. Consequently, Misra, through her creative writing, prepares the solid background for long-cherished desire of gender equality. Her novel attempts to give a new shape to the emerging trends of 'new womanhood' in Indian society. It is about women of all ages and sections of Indian society. Basically, women at large.

### Conclusion

There are, of course, changes happening over a period of time that have made women more assertive, more vocal and more articulate in their ideas or expression. At the same time, they can be termed as 'new woman' who don't believe in suffering silently but coming to the front and aim at building their own individuality. The 'new woman' is emerging as a powerfully empowered woman through education and wisdom. Educational avenues available for modern women greatly strengthen the ability of standing equal to men. Only if, they themselves become independent, will be able to support and help others. The complete growth of the Indian society is possible only when women will stand equal to men and give their maximum contribution in building up an optimal society. Especially, higher education empowers women and "emboldens them so that they are confident about entering any field or profession not previously open to women" (Desai and Thakkar 67). In such a scenario, the primary goal should be to lower the cost of girls' education so that the school dropouts may lessen with immediately. There are also many constitutional provisions for gender equality. With the implementation of such rights in the constitution, the inequalities and injustices which Indian women suffer have also lessen.

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