

A Displaced Person's Quest for Discovering the Self in Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises*

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Abstract

Jaishree Misra's semi-autobiographical work Ancient Promises narrates the trajectories in the life of the protagonist Janaki allies Janu. The novel is about a young girl's painful journey to self-discovery and freedom. It also raises some very important questions regarding the view of society towards womanhood and disability, as in a country like India both are viewed as the "other". Janu undergoes constant struggle in her life as an affectionate and submissive daughter, an empathetic but guilty lover, a restless and depressed wife, a helpless and desolate mother and so on. The story of Janaki is obviously a message to the present-day society. This paper examines quest motif of the central character.

Keywords: *Freedom, Search for an Identity, Quest Motif*



“you can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status, of its women’.
(Jawaharlal Nehru)

For a Country two million cases of female infanticide and nearly 5000 dowry deaths every year, the less spoken on the status of its women, the better. All these happens in a country which is set up on the principles laid down by Manu who saw

women as “worthy; of worship”. Our country can boast of a decade of reforms. But what of consequences? The Govt. has launched a number of programs for the empowerment of women, including the observation of the year 2001 as the year of empowerment. It was said, our vision in the new century is of a nation where women are equal partners with men. There has been an alarming rise in the atrocities committed against women, while the constitution guarantees equal opportunity, patriarchy asserts itself through legal loopholes to consolidate the age-old domination.

Indian English literature is an Endeavour of showcasing the rare gems of Indian writing in English. The Indian English novel evolved as a subaltern consciousness as a reaction to break away from the colonial literature. Hence post- colonial literature in India witnessed a revolution against the idiom which the colonial writers followed. The cobweb of romance, the strange mind of the woman and the very idea that women need something more than just food and shelter are ideally portrayed by women writers while making Indian English novel to take the final towards maturity. The fast changing pace of the new Indian is thus ideally painted by the female writers.

Many of the women novelists of today don't depict their women according to strict traditional code. These Indian women novelists have successfully projected the urges, dreams and desires of Indian women, in particular the middleclass housewife who refuses to be suffocated by her environment. Their canvas is not limited to women only: they depict a wider cultural scene, and the problems and difficulties, Joys and sorrows of human beings which have universal significance.

The important issues and themes that are portrayed are those of mother daughter relationship, partition and women, same sex love relationships and the emerging chick-it novels dealing with young, fashionable independent working city women. Gender question, its nature and social, political, psychological and existential effects have been studied in the texts of Kamala Markandeya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Nayantara Sehgal. The relationship between caste, class and gender have been explored in the narratives of Arundati Roy, and Sivakami, while themes of diaspora, dislocation and identity crisis are studied in Bharati Mukherjee, Jumpsalhari, Kiran Desai and JaishreeMisra.

Many Indian novelists have explored female subjectively in order to establish an identity that is not imposed by patriarchal society. The search for identity is thus a major metaphor in creative writing. The modern man has shown a serious concern for the spiritual malaise of modern life and the journey of self-discovery has been one of his chief preoccupations. Thus, the displaced person's quest for discovering the self is a common place theme in modern fiction and it has a peculiar pertinence in the Indian context. Thus, self and related concepts like self - actualization have become popular constructs within literature particularly in Novels. Self - actualization is the process of becoming one's best and truest self. JaishreeMisra attempted this theme successfully.

JaishreeMisra, the grandniece of the renowned Malayalam writer and Jnanapith awardee Thakazhi Shiva Sankara Pillai, was born in Kerala and raised in Delhi. Her debut novel *Ancient Promises* was published and sold worldwide by Penguin UK and became one of the best sellers in India. Subsequent books include *Accidents Like Love and Marriage*, *Afterwards The little Book of Romance*, *Secrets and Lies*, *Secrets and Sins* etc. A historical novel based on the life of Rani Lekshmibai of Jhansi was published in Dec. 2007 and banned soon after by the Uttar Pradesh state govt. in India. Her latest work *A Scandalous secret* comes on 2011.

JaishreeMisra has written her heart out in her first novel *Ancient Promises*, a touching stories a story of every woman, a story she prefers to be called a mother - daughter story. It is a moving story of one woman's painful journey of self-discovery. It is about a marriage, a divorce and motherhood. It is about why we love and loss, sometimes seem to have little control over our destinies.

It is tale of love and loyalty. Apart from that, it is a brilliant debut by JaishreeMisra. The narration is amazingly simple, yet intensely alive. It is a simple tale but in Misra's deft hands, it evokes tears, joy and feelings just like the author as she gently stresseswith the protagonist Janaki's tale; a Wong willed but dutiful woman. who dares to challenge the set norms to find the true happiness in a rightful manner?

Janu's life takes a new then at the age of 16 when she meets Arjun, the local school cricket team hero. Their friendship slowly blooms into romance and eventually takes a nasty turn when Janu's parents get wind of her romantic escapades. This romance seems to meet an end when Arjun leaves for England for his higher studies.

Janu enters a new world of style at Kerala. With a pragmatism that contrasts with her later yearning for her first love, she agrees to be married into a rich and traditional Malayali family dominated by women with thick swaying plaits. The rightful happiness and affection become a distant desire for Janu. The Maarar family detests the Delhi background of Janu and encourages Suresh to be aloof or uncaring to her feelings.

As years passed, Janu expects that the birth of a child will bring a change in her life. Wheii her daughter, Riya, is born with a learning disability the formula for pathos is complete. Determined to secure a place for herself and Riya, Janu pursues her education and raises Riya without anybody. Finally,Janu wins a scholarship in England, where Arjunn is still waiting for t her. At last, Janu confesses to her husband and seeks a divorce. He plots and maneuvers and puts her in mental hospital. She seeks refugee in her old home with her mother and grandmother. But she decides to leave her unhappy life behind and go to England again. Arjun and Janu relieve their lost loving moments in London. However, they realize that their life is incomplete without Riya. The novels sentimentality is alleviated by occasional bursts of detached observation and evocative imagery.

More than a transparently personal story, it is a sensitive portrayal of Janu's life. The whole story centers on Janu's bold move towards the establishment of a new familial order. The disturbed lovely psyche of high imaginative Janu seeks love and solace in a private way. She lost her vibrant self through a marriage which doesn't give any importance to her identity.

The novel represents more or less the psyche of modern intelligent women of the twenty first century and it is her comment on the world and what she faced from her surroundings. The passive women of the past have ceased to exist. In her place, we have the highly intelligent, sensitive women who question the denial of freedom for her and refuse to accept the shackles and bonds which kept subjugated. In the novel Misra is giving a picture of the modern women who is rebelling against the chains in her life in order to explore her potentials and to self-actualize and to live in her own terms, regardless of consequences that such rebellion may have on her life.

Janaki as a teenager possessed a strong determined personality and a lively, imaginative, wonderful, self-actualized soul. She is a modern girl and has her own measures of values and views about life and herself. Love irradiates her family like a rainbow. Being the only child, she enjoys the warmth of love, care, and concern of her parents in full swing. She always shared her life with her mother and never kept any secret from her. She always wished to be at home with her dear parents. This happiness and security which she experienced in her child hood has been instrumented in shaping her identity.

She belongs to a traditional Hindu Nair family which has a real identity of its own and knowingly or unknowingly Janu absorbed this in herself. Though she is born and brought up in Delhi metropolitan city, her parents keep her aloof from the culture of Delhi and taught her the tradition of her family. Her family is a traditional patriarchal family which is completely steeped in rituals and it teaches women to be submissive. So, women are very much obedient to men in the family. Right from her birth, the so called feminine virtues and graces are so instilled in her that she forgets that she has an independent identity as a woman. Janu's mother and grandmother are accurate examples of this category of women. But Janu belongs to the modern society and she has a well-developed self and status. Though her outlook is modern, she is always reminded of her Keralite origin and of traditional values which makes indelible stamp on her identity.

Janu's life changes to a new phase with the advent of Arjun, they have an awkward beginning but soon become very good friends. Their friendship blossoms in love. A love that is deep and confusing to two teenagers who only know that they are in love, not what to do about it. Her father accidentally knows about their relationship and beats her for the time. Her conventional parents forbid her from studies and thereby her education comes to an abrupt end. Her angry and disapproving parents decide that the only thing that remains to be done is to get her married.

Being a girl in the traditional patriarchal family, Janu has to neglect her love for Arjun. Even though she tries to cancel the engagement she truly believes that, by going against her parents' wishes, she would make the ones who cared for her and brought her up very unhappy. So she yields before her parents and discards her fledging love for him. And here, for the first time in her life she loses her identity. Even though Janu knows who she is and what is good for her, her inability to hurt her dear parents who brought her up with much love and protection, urges her to pull back her own whims. Here Janu lose her vibrant self and there begins the second stage of her life. It is the beginning of the lonely journey of her life. In this situation, Janu comes into an existential problem, an identity crisis. Janu has lost her identity as modern girl. She absorbs the reality outside herself, ie the reality of her parents the reality of her family. Because of this assimilation of reality, she gives consent to a marriage which she dislikes.

The patriarchal structure dwarfs the very existence of women. It is believed that if women are to derive satisfaction it should be within the frame work of their relationship with their husbands and their families. Even the faintest of any such ideas that all human beings exist primarily for the realization of one's self is considered preposterous.

In Janu's care her marriage with Suresh ends up in a disaster. Her husband's family sees her as an outcast with her being excluded from household activities and discussions. Janu gets perpetually belated by her snobbish mother - in - law and sister-in - law.

As a typical Hindu wife, schooled in the patriarchal ideas of the holy contract of a marriage which was an eternal union, Janu tries desperately to fit into the mould of a true meek, submissive wife. Brought up in faraway Delhi, this young girls and new bride is suddenly caught in the throes of traditionalist's orientation. She seems to want to accept and believe in the age-old ideas laid down in the epics that marred life was *Stridharma*!. The Maraar family expects her to follow the trodden path of a dutiful wife, an obedient daughter — in- law, a respectful sister- in law etc.

In a poignant description of the isolated, alienated young bride, Misra raises serious questions about, the very institution of marriage where a woman is uprooted from her family surroundings in which she has grown up and thrust into to a totally new, unfamiliar, unfriendly and almost hostile environment.

However, it is this quiet, but sure eroding of identity that leads to a total negation of the self and gradually the loss of an individual identity. The adjustments that are expected of her are innumerable and often impossible too. Whether it in the way she spoke Malayalam, or dried out the clothes or dressed, whether she choose to wear a particular type of jewellery in preference to the other — each one was cause enough for a snide remark or a direct criticism. It is true that Janu Married against her

wish but she is never an uncompromising girl. She puts Arjun memory behind herself and put all her energies into her new life.

The attempt to make the new bride conform to the expectations of this new family begins in earnest soon after the wedding. In Janu's cases, this process of transformation or metamorphosis or acculturation begins on the day of the wedding reception and thereby she has completely lost her identity.

I was helped by Sathi and an aunt in looking like someone else. A plait of hair had been bought . . . and was firmly attached to my shoulder- length Delhi tresses... A third layer of black eye liner was parented around my lashes... A pair of pretend tips were outlines hues around my own smaller ones; By the time had worn Sathijewellery and the brand new Kanjipuram Saree that had been for me, I was somebody. (*Ancient Promises 41*)

This is an outspoken comment on the eroding of family identity which begins as soon as a girl is married. For man, his will is law but for woman, there are certain pre-ordained moulds into which she has to fit herself or else she is crushed and finished. She has to be a perfect angel in the house as called by Virgin-Wood.

Though Janu tried hard to become one among the Marar's she didn't succeed in it She changed her whole personality to fit in with the Marar. Janaki's was a situation that the present day Indian women often confront, when after a relatively liberal, unfettered upbringing in a big city, they are forcibly married off into a conservative small town.

The ancient promises that have to be accepted and lived up to as a part of the societal expectations do not succeed in Janu's case. A Collision of patriarchal norms and societal restrictions compounded by ancient religious practices and beliefs totally annihilate any hope of achievement or self-fulfillment within the given parameters of family and marriage. A keen observation of the position of women in our society brings to the fore, the pathetic condition of their being. Women tend to become defiant when their patience taxed of too long. There has always been the yearning to discover themselves to find out their face beneath the facades that have been forced on them. Though they have at times willingly and at other times reluctantly accepted their roles as mothers, wives, daughters and subordinates of men, yet the aspiration to find and discover their identity has not died down. This search for self-hood has kept them on their dreams of emancipation.

Janu's attempts to her identity is revealed in the second part of the novel, when she realizes that if she remains as a silent, suffering, sacrificing, conventional woman, the life of both of them will be at stake. Janu's urge for self-actualization gives her superior ability to reason, to see the truth, and to act logically and efficiently, Janu accepts the fact that Riya, her daughter isn't any place in the life of her husband and his family, so that the struggle for the approval of herself and Riya among them would be

in vain. When a living being confronts with the problem of existence, only the one who strive hard will survive. Janu finally stands up to her and refuses to leave Riya under the care of a servant.

Janu realizes the fact that she was free and she neither had to struggle for their approval any more put Riya through the same hopeless loop. She then empowers the convictions and religions about herself and from her own beliefs and values, she makes about the right choice parenthood. This probably gives her strength to fight back for the first time. Breaking up illusions and learning's what one's potentialities are not only a part of discovering what one is, but also of self-realization. Janu is true to the best in herself. She emerges strong and independent as never before. She by her own peculiar way plucks up to. The courage and step by step works her way out of marriage into which she inadvertently stepped. She starts to mingle more with other people and this gives her some tips improve the plight of her. She learns a new way to cope with harsh living conditions or effective ways to transcend her life situations. She becomes more aware of different levels of human experiences that go beyond survival, generally seeks increased fulfillment. Determinedly she starts to continue her bachelor degree and through the progression of education gets some more guts and it help her is learn more about life. Gradually it develops her potentials and more accurately access the requirements of a full life without any help she looks Riya and at the same time with a vengeance pursues her education.

As she strengthens her identity, her roles become increasingly flexible. She realizes that she is not meant to be a possession in Marar family. She discovers that she is a human being in her own right and not an item of property belonging to the Marar family. Instead of defining her in narrow traditional ways, she begins to interpret more broadly roles, bonds with others and expectations. Her newly awakened sense of identity dominants herself and completely swamps her previous conventional notions of a women's and a wife's duties in life. In the past she has always she passive and submissive but when faces with reality, she rises to the occasion and declares her independence.

Ideas and ideals serve rational or practical purpose for women's fulfillment. The ideal of freedom in her leads to new opportunities and erective behavior. She acquires the freedom to do anything for the sake of her and her child -Despite all the restriction and difficulties in her life, Janu looks up and forward to ideals she has chosen to identify herself with.

Janu's gets for the approval of her real self in so intense that she finds herself a place among the highly qualified, elite and edified fellow interviewers. Self-realization is fulfillment of oneself of the possibilities of one's character or personality. The highest good for man consists in realizing or fulfilling himself usually on the assumption that he has certain inborn activities constitute his real or ideal self: A self-actualized person has the motivation to realize his own maximum, potential and possibilities. Janaki. in

her perspectives perception and questions displays most of the characteristic of self-realized people. As a self-realizing person Janaki used and exploited her talent and potentialities to attain what she really is.

Thus, the novel is a sensitive account of a girl's efforts to find her destination in life and is full of psychological observation and culminates in a same and balanced view of life. The whole story centers on Janu's bold move towards the establishment of a new familial order. The disturbed lovely psyche of highly imaginative Janu seeks love and solace in a private terrain in a private way. The world that JanshreeMisra project is one of humiliation, loneliness and displacement. Social forces and masculine prejudice join together to create a sense of impotence and nothingness. Like most women's autobiographies, it is not only the quest of the self but a singular voice recounting the experience of group. In spite of her self-determination, Janu does not lose her innocence and motherhood.

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