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**REPRESSION, RECUPERATION AND LIBERATION:  
A FEMINIST READING OF JAISHREE MISRA'S *ANCIENT PROMISES***

**ARUNA MARY THOMAS**

Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
National College, Trivandrum, Kerala

**ABSTRACT**



The article envisages a feminist analysis of Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises*. In doing so the novel can be understood as an indictment on oppressive patriarchal culture which was prevalent in Kerala in the twentieth century and to a certain extent still exists. The present analysis puts in perspective an appalling picture of the struggle of a woman constantly in search of her identity, a woman pursuing her rightful share of happiness and how she achieves it through education. The study discusses feminism, gender discrimination and disorientation as a result of displacement and uprootment through marriage.

The article is divided into five sections which deal with different stages of Janu's life. The first part is on the similarity between the lives of the author Jaishree Misra and the protagonist Janu. The second section 'The Torn Female Self' narrates Janu's ideas of liberation even in a happy and lovely childhood, her unexpected love and arranged marriage, the dramatic experiences of Janu before and after marriage, her life in Maraar family which finally led Janu to break up all social and emotional ties and it also tells how Janu exemplifies Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas on the importance of education for a middle-class woman as stated in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The third one 'Recuperating Subject' is about those aspects of the novel which finally led to the thoughts of liberation sprout up in Janu's mind. The fourth section 'Bloomed Womanhood' discusses the strong ideologies and psycho-social thinking in feminist terms that were lying dormant in Janu sometime from childhood which become finally manifest in her womanhood. The concluding part is a brief discussion on the moving story of Janu's painful journey of self discovery.

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**Women's Writing in Indian English Literature**

Indian women novelists have given a new dimension to the Indian literature in English. It is still believed that women are the upholders of the rich Indian tradition. Widely considered as feminist writers they portray their characters as human

beings who also feel a longing for their own space and their worth as individuals. Jaishree Misra has a deep sense of mental processes that she effectively deals with human inner feeling.

Jaishree Misra born into a Malayali household, her father an army man, enjoyed a

comparatively carefree and controlled and restricted modern life style. She fell in love as a teenager but her disapproving parents guided her into an arranged marriage, keeping their daughters best interests at heart. The arranged marriage was doomed to failure right from the beginning. Her modern sensibility could not cope with the traditional sensibilities she had to absorb and observe at her in-laws household. The situation worsened with the birth of her differently abled child. During her frantic efforts to secure life of freedom and joy for her daughter and herself, she accidentally chances upon her old teenage lover. Soon they decide to start a life free from the shackles of domestic bonds and obligations. After a bitter life threatening battle with her in-laws, she eventually file for divorce and after a battle she gained custody of her child and remarried and moved to England. 'Janu', the protagonist of the novel has thus turned out to be an unveiling of the self for the writer.

#### **The Torn Female Self**

Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* emerged from the social and political turbulence caused by the French Revolution. Far from portraying women as superior to men, Wollstonecraft wanted to raise their overall moral and intellectual stature to make them more rational citizens. The ideal woman pictured in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is active and intelligent, blending civic and familial responsibilities, freed from drudgery and debasing frugality.

Although she accepted that most middle-class women would marry and remain at home, she wanted girls' education to prepare them for the possibility of economic independence, to give them freedom and dignity, rather than the ability to fascinate potential husbands. Janu, comes in context of Mary Wollstonecraft in her fight for stability through education. Janu's struggle begins with her entrance to the conservative Maraar household where everyone struggles for affection and acceptance.

A middle class girl should heed to each and every petty interest of her in-laws may be its her clothes. "Yes, like I'll get used to giving up my studies, my friends and my freedom?" (65). Shulamith

Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* is an uncompromising view of patriarchal history. She argues that women's oppression is the oldest, most rigid class/caste system in existence. Firestone's vision of a feminist Utopia is one in which reproductive technology will have removed the tyranny of sexual division based on biology. For Janu, Riya, a differently able child was more like an added misery to her already miserable life.

#### **Recuperating Subject**

In Indian social thought, Manu the lawgiver of Hindu Dharma Shashtra, assigns woman a secondary position in relation to man. Manusmriti endorses the servile existence of women and therefore curbs the growth and development of woman as a free and autonomous human being. According to the tradition, a woman's job was to keep the family intact and reach out to every member. But every woman can find that she herself is a victim of all sorts of taunts and derisions like what Janu realized. It's about her self-discovery. Through her self-revelation she found an outlet for her suppressed feelings and is on the threshold of self-discovery.

Almost all the women seem to find the ray of happiness only when they become aware. This awareness is created only when one looks at one's self. Women are strong. Women can do everything as well as men. Women can do much more but a woman has to seek that vein of strength in herself, it doesn't show itself naturally. What is remarkable in the novel is the message of hope through change and even the ending is revealed as a new beginning. Janu's way of entering into the brave new world was through education. She decided to complete her graduation and laid much focus on it. Motherhood provided Janu with a fresh confidence which was till then buried in an unfathomed depth. Janu had learnt to discard the insignificance shown to her education by the Maraar family. "I tried not to mind because I had a wonderful secret lodged away carefully in the bottom drawer of my desk. My letter of acceptance had arrived" (152).

#### **Bloomed Womanhood**

Janu was gradually beginning to understand how a good upbringing was really a terribly unhelpful thing for a girl in Kerala. Janu wanted love,

care and concern where as what Suresh wanted was wealth and reputation. The days that followed were surreal days with their outward semblance of normality while underneath bubbled the lava of hate impatient to escape and destroy everything in its path. But Janu found refuge in her dreams about future.

With the third part of the book,a new chapter was to open in Janu's life with no promises of any more and gratitude that miracles could sometimes come her way too."The dream was over, sleep had fled"(4).After a short struggle with herself to spare the agonies of life vanishing into the blue she finally flew to England. Janu has finally attained the maturity to accept the fate of her life as the plan of god, for everything happens for a reason.

Janu also realized the depth of unhappiness in Kerala when she had been removed from it. In a way she realized the challenge she had to face in Kerala was nothing in the midst of the busy new life .She could feel her wings beginning to unfurl as though it marked a new beginning for the whole world.

#### **Finding the Self**

Traditional sex role reinforced the idea that the women's needs were fulfilled and their identities derived only directly through men. Cultural norms encourage the belief that the failure of the marriage represented the women's failure as individuals. Thus, it is in the process of trying to save the marriage at all costs, that women suffered from intense feelings of shame and guilt, and this kept them trapped in their relationships. This was what happened with Janu also, she tried maximum to adjust with the situations, and she would have done so if her child was a normal one.

According to the post colonial theorist Chandra Lalpade Mohanty's essay 'Under Western Eyes', published in 1984,male dominance over women is deeply ingrained within the many facets of Indian culture and, contrary to the experience of women in the western world-where women's struggles for equal political and legal rights were conducted against the background of largely successful interventions within political, economic, social and military systems.

Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises*, a sensitive account of a girl's efforts to find her destination in life,is full of keen psychological observations, and culminates in a sane and balanced view of life. According to the categorization of women's literature as feminine, feminist, and female by Elaine Showalter in her paper 'A Literature of Their Own: British Novelists from Bronte to Lessing *Ancient Promises* would come somewhere between feminist and female. It is all about the self discovery of a woman by herself. Janu finds the ray of happiness only when she becomes aware of and the awareness is created only when one look at one's self. She is empowered to reclaim her lost love and releases herself from the hold of conventions and family expectation. She comes finally to her conclusion and feel at peace with herself and her world.

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