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JOURNEY OF REVELATION: QUEST MOTIF IN JAISHREE MISRA'S *ANCIENT PROMISES*

ABHIJEETH P.S<sup>1</sup>, Dr. INDU B<sup>2</sup>

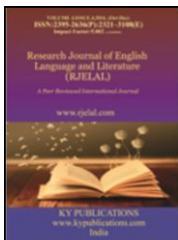
<sup>1</sup>PG Student, Department of English, Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Amritapuri Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Amrita University, India

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor (Sr Grade) Department of English, Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Amritapuri, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Amrita University, India

ABSTRACT

Jaishree Misra's novel *Ancient Promises* throws light on the struggle undergone by women in the present day society. This novel discusses the plight of Janaki, who unwillingly agrees to fulfil the wishes of her parents. Forced to forget her first lover, compelled to marry another man of her parents' choice, she becomes the mother of a baby girl, Riya. But fate plays rather a cruel game with her when Riya turns out to be mentally handicapped. This novel traces the trajectory of her growth as an individual who faces many problems with a strong mind. The story of Janaki is a message to the society. This paper examines the quest motif of the central character.

Key words: Revelation, identity crisis, quest motif



The most painful problem that a man confronts today is the existential problem. It happens when life seems futile and results in identity crisis. Identity refers to a person's interpretation and expression of his/her own individuality. It is the cornerstone of one's life. Society has a crucial role in moulding one's character. Many Indian writers like Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Indira Goswami, Bharati Mukherjee and Shashi Deshpande "...have created ripples in the society of male domination by taking women as women seriously in their writings...they have taken the pen in their hands to enlighten a woman's image as a source of life, power, energy and action to break the double standard in patriarchy, to bring forth in light the woman's language and world, to bring her to the mainstream and to give her a room of her own (Nutan Agarwal, "Breaking the Silence" 64).

Jaishree Misra is one such writer whose semi-autobiographical novel *Ancient Promises* discusses the plight of a woman, named Janaki who

is forced to obey the code and conduct put forward by the society. Even though she has lived in Delhi, her roots lie deep in Kerala. Owing to this, she faces the crisis of hybridity in an unknown land. When her parents come to know her relation with Arjun, they force her to come to Kerala which results in her marriage with Suresh. She enters the Maraar household with lots of hopes and dreams. Though a Keralite, she is considered more like a Delhi based spoiled brat. There again, she loses her identity as an individual. Thus the issue of lack of identity and marginalization is clearly delineated in her novel *Ancient Promises*.

Jaishree Misra, born in 1961, in a Malayali family in New Delhi has lived a modern life in the metropolitan city. She has taken a Masters degree in English Literature from Kerala University, and two postgraduate diplomas. Her oeuvre includes – *Accidents like Love and Marriage* (2001), *Afterwards* (2004), *Rani* (2007), *Secret and Lies* (2007), *The Little Book of Romance Secret and Sins* (2010) and *Scandalous Secret* (2011) and a collection of poems.

Misra's protagonists are educated women who do not have to depend on men to live. She is not against the institution of marriage, but appears to be against compelling one to get married.

Feminist movements aim at empowering the position of women in the society. Jaishree Misra's novel *Ancient Promises* is a typical example of the way a woman is treated in the Indian society. There have been significant changes in the roles of women in the post-independence era. Despite all this, she is still not completely emancipated. Women are supposed to behave in a particular way according to certain rules and codes of conduct fashioned by society. In an ordinary Indian family, the birth of a boy is preferred to that of a girl. He is considered an asset and she, a liability. This is from where a system of patriarchy originates. An image of the so-called ideal woman is constructed by the society. In order to reach this rank, a woman should control her speech, wear only *saree* and other society-permitted clothes, restrict her movement, and finally reduce her identity to the subaltern status of the 'other'. It is the general tendency of man to control, suppress and enjoy his power and authority over anything and everything. These particular roles of man and woman are expressed through values, customs, laws and social duties in Indian society. A girl has a lot of restrictions and a boy, on the other hand, has none. The social structure in India consists of institutions like joint family, caste, religious practices and values where women have only subordinate position. The institution of marriage restricts the movement of a woman as an independent person. Her status changes from a 'woman' to a 'wife' and later to a 'mother'. Her roles change. She is no more considered an independent individual, but depends on others. The purpose of her life also changes and others would give no importance to her individual freedom. Later she gets confined to the four walls of her kitchen. The familial roles favor and promote patriarchal values and codes of behavior and a woman is always subordinate to man who rules the family. Man has a major role in the process of decision-making in an Indian family.

In *Ancient Promises*, Janaki faces such issues. The novel begins with the statement "My

marriage ended today" (Misra, *Ancient Promises* 3). The words of her mother as they leave the court, "her voice and eyes brimming with sadness, that it had been my fate" (3), indicate the main theme of the novel. The novel discusses how Indian parents fail to understand their children and also about the anxiety undergone by the teenage girl's parents. It also portrays how marriage becomes a potent weapon in the hands of men in controlling and suppressing women. Janu first meets Arjun in the company of her classmate and later they have their casual meetings and become close. She is thrilled over the concept of love even though she is not completely sure if she is supposed to have known the feeling at this tender age. Her father is totally against the concept of young girls and boys falling in love and roaming around with each other. Janu's parents have led a conventional life and believe in children settling in life with their parents' choice and blessings. Their daughter finding a life partner for herself is quite unimaginable for them. They believe that parents know what is best for their children. Janu is tense and at the same time thrilled to keep a secret from her parents, especially her meetings with Arjun at Char Minar. But soon she is caught red-handed and the parents lose their trust in her. She is then taken to Kerala and her wish to continue her education after schooling is not fulfilled.

During her visit to Kerala, fate plays rather a cruel game with her when Maheswari Maraar comes with a proposal for her when she has seen her in the temple. She does not completely disagree to her parents' wishes as she wants to compensate her secretive behavior which once upset them. However, she puts forward petty reasons for not getting married. Arjun has secured admission at Hull University by that time and has decided to join his mother in England. She sends a letter to Arjun informing him about the proposal and gets married to Suresh at Guruvayur temple with the blessings of the members of the family. She has sacrificed her love for Arjun. Her decision to comply with the decision of the family members shows how patriarchal indoctrination has corrupted the rationality and objectivity of even educated women. She is not bold enough to tell her parents about her love and to say 'no' to marrying Suresh as it would

damage the good name and reputation of her family. Her mother says "The reputations of families were carried on the shoulders of their daughters" (46-47). Janu would have kept this in mind when she had got the marriage proposal. This silent acceptance shows that Janu is born and brought up in a family which compels women to accept and internalize feminine virtues of meekness, obedience and modesty. There is a clash between traditional values and the modern concept of freedom. Even though Janu is a modern girl, she decides to become a meek and obedient daughter when she decides not to go against her parents.

She feels odd even on the day of her marriage, being covered up in the traditional dress. The image of a school going girl clad in jeans starts receding from her mind. Though she feels a fish out of water, she never expresses her feelings. "A sonorous drumbeat took up in her head: Don't trip don't fall don't go and ruin it all, Don't cry don't say I should not be here at all" (73). The many regulations that a girl is supposed to follow after marriage teach her about the submissive role she has to play once she becomes a wife. Janu says: "While walking around the flickering *vilakku* [lamp] at the temple with my head bowed, I'd plenty of time to observe his feet as he walked ahead of me. I'd felt a sudden lurching realization that I was getting more time to familiarize myself with the feet of the man I was marrying than his face!" (84).

Janu knows that she is supposed to obey her husband's orders to become his mere shadow and nothing more. A woman is always allowed to stand behind the man, never in front of him to voice her opinions. Her expectations, when she enters the Maraar household, are shattered with a list of do's and don'ts. On the first morning, she wakes up early and enters the kitchen only after taking bath as her mother has instructed her to do so. As she is not fluent in Malayalam, she speaks in English to express herself. Her courteous exchange of "please" and "thank you" in return of every dialogue results in her getting snapped by her mother-in-law. She said: "Look, you're not in Delhi any more. Like it or not, you now live in Kerala, so I suggest you drop all these fashionable Pleases and Thank Yous. Here we don't believe in unnecessary style" (80). Even

though her mother-in-law utters that dialogue with a short laugh, there is certainly an edge to it. She tries hard to step into the shoes of an ideal wife.

Life of Janu and Suresh is one of monotony and boredom as it becomes a matter of ritual and habit resulting in disharmony in their conjugal life. Suresh considers his wife only as a homemaker to be possessed as a private property. So he automatically and systematically controls her sexuality, mobility, speech, and indirectly, her identity. She remains invisible and silent in the Maraar household. Her indifferent husband is too busy to notice the struggle she undergoes to adjust herself with the customs and traditions of the family. He barely notices her and she feels insignificant. She feels lonely even in the midst of a crowd. However, she hopes that motherhood would improve her status. Unfortunately a mentally retarded child is born to her. She does not get any support from her husband; he wants to escape from the suffocating conditions in the household. She contemplates "If I did leave Kerala with a baby and no education to speak of, how far could I go?" (123). She decides to get a BA degree in English Literature through distance education as an answer to the seemingly rhetoric question. Thus unknowingly, she evolves and uplifts herself as a person. Her mother-in-law says, "I'm not having people pointing at us and pitying us, our family is always admired in this town" (133). However, Janu does not leave her daughter even after the many pricking comments of her mother-in-law. As a mother, she understands that a child like Riya, if left uncared for, would perish. Thus Riya gives her the strength to raise her voice against the rules and conventions and to fight back. Riya's schooling ends in a disaster as she gets expelled from her school for the reason that she is weak in studies. This problem gives her an idea to take her abroad for education. Unknowingly, Janu takes her destiny in her own hands and designs her future. She then offers to help the early intervention group at the under-staffed school. This was partly to keep an eye on Riya and to escape from the Maraars' control, and also to equip herself better to deal with Riya's problems. Sheela Kuriakose advises her to go abroad to do a course in special education, and to take Riya with her. This paves the way for a turning

point in her life and helps her to stand on her own legs. When she goes to Delhi to attend an interview, she happens to meet Leena and meets Arjun. She decides to go to England and not to America to pursue her education so that she could live with Arjun.

She makes up her mind to get a divorce from Suresh and decides to tell him after reaching home. Janu reveals her plans to Suresh. He becomes angry on hearing this and considers it an insult to his manhood. In order to stop her from going away, he decides to spread a rumor that she is mentally unstable. She is taken to Chottanikkara in order to get rid of the so called evil spirits from her body. She is emotionally tortured by the Maraar family. When her mother comes to know about the torture in the Maraar household, she decides to take her home and get a divorce. Suresh does not agree for a divorce as it would mar the reputation of the family. He takes Riya with him and since she has no other choice Janu leaves for England with Arjun. After staying a few months there, she realizes that her daughter is her first priority. She returns to India and this time she gets a divorce and Riya is allowed to be with her mother. The novel ends with the sentence "Tomorrow, the next chapter would begin" (305) which is rather a hopeful note that someday Janaki would marry Arjun.

The whole novel revolves round Janu's efforts to come out from the grip of a patriarchal society. The protagonist, after a great deal of struggle, breaks the chains of confinement and suppression. Though she lives in Delhi, she was brought up like every other Malayali girl, subjected to many restrictions and limitations. She is not at all self-reliant as she does not know what she is supposed to do and what not to. She is not that sort of a girl who is fascinated by teenage love and hence she has no desire to fall in love. But circumstances lead her to fall in love with Arjun. She enjoys the warmth and support from Arjun which brings her closer to him and she experiences a new world of happiness. But when she realizes that her family will not encourage this relationship, she controls her emotions and decides to leave Arjun. This shows that she cannot take a stand of her own. She gets easily persuaded by her parents.

In other words, her existence is predominantly governed by the do's and don'ts of others. In Maraar household, she is completely sealed and branded as a Delhi based girl. She is suppressed and tortured in many ways by the Maarar family, especially by her mother-in-law. She is purely moulded according to the interests of the society in which she lives. This is evident from her first day in Maarar household. On her wedding reception itself, her in-laws transform her to a new individual subjected to their sense of fashion and dressing. Janu says;

I was helped by Sathi and an aunty in looking like someone else. A plait of hair had been bought ...and was firmly attached to my shoulder-length Delhi tresses. A thick layer of eye liner was painted around my lashes ... By the time I had worn Sathi's jewellery and the brand new Kanjeevaram sari that had been for me, I was somebody else (92).

As she is brought up in Delhi, she cannot adjust to the atmosphere in the Maarar family. Janu never raises her voice against the injustice imposed on her by others and by the strange beliefs of a conventional society. She tries to be a good daughter-in-law and wife but all her efforts are in vain as she does not get what she has deserved. Janu's family is not as financially sound as her husband's. Because of this she is many a time humiliated by her in-laws. Padmaraja Maarar, her mother-in-law, tells her daughter Sathi, "Oh look! Sathi, have you ever seen such tiny ear rings? They've liked your jumikis, only ten times smaller" (91). Janu never utters a word against all these humiliations. Her greatest concern is that Suresh never cares for her. He completely ignores her. So all her dreams and hopes for a new life vanish into thin air. The negligence faced by her and her child makes Janu take a decision to come out of her confinement. In pursuit of a better future for Riya, she decides to go abroad. Till then she had no favourite colour and every picture in her life was painted by others. But for the sake of Riya, She decides to live her own life. Accidentally this decision makes her meet Arjun again. For the first time in her life, she discovers herself and breaks all the 'Ancient Promises' of the society.

Like any other Indian girl, Janu is also brought up with the idea that marriage makes one's life complete and the only aim of an Indian wife is to follow the shadow of her husband. Even in our Puranas, we see Ahalya, Sita, Draupadi, Tara and Mandodari, treading their path showed to them by their husbands. The adverse effect of patriarchy on Indian society is different from that of the West and therefore Indian women writers like Jaishree Misra have tried to bring up their own views. In *Ancient Promises*, Janu wishes to share her pain and sufferings with her husband, but he never gives a chance. She feels that Suresh is an escapist. She becomes a laughing-stock in the Maarar household. Her poor knowledge of Malayalam is made fun of. She is deprived of care and love which she longs for. The alienation she experiences is enhanced by the fact that Suresh never responds to her emotions.

*Ancient Promises* depicts the quest for identity of woman. *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is yet another work that displays the subjugation of women. Panchali, in the novel is showcased as someone who comes uninvited with her brother. Her servant, Dhai Ma complains that the education she receives is making her "too hardheaded and argumentative, too manlike" (Divakaruni 23). This itself shows her thought process that education is meant for only men and not for women. Her brother's tutor tells her of the typical role a woman has to play in a man's life. He says, "A kshatriya woman's highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life-her father, brother, husband, and sons" (25-26). She retorts "And who decided that a woman's highest purpose was to support men? A man, I would wager! Myself, I plan on doing other things with my life" (26). Thus Draupadi declares that she has a right over her life and she would be the decision-maker in her life. Just like Janaki, who does not have a say in the matter of choosing a life partner, Draupadi too has a *swayamvar* where she does not have any significant role. Draupadi is happy when she is told that she will have a *swayamvar* and that she will be able to choose her own husband. But later when she comes to know that her father has set up a challenge, she grows fierce. She says: "Why even call it a *swayamvar*, then?...Why make a

spectacle of me before all those kings? It's my father, not I, who gets to decide whom I'll marry" (56). This shows that she has been deprived of choosing her own husband. The same marginalization echoes in the life of Janaki in the novel *Ancient Promises*.

The author is not against marriages, but argues only for equal rights and position for both the husband and the wife. Thus the author brings into picture the way a woman is suppressed even in the post-independence era and emphasizes that she should find strength in rebelling against the existing norms and rules.

Janaki is an epitome, a representation of the tens of thousands of women who aspire for liberation. These representations like many from time immemorial have passed into oblivion. Janaki, being a rarity, trespasses the society-drawn contours to shun the definite dogmas every emancipated woman would aspire for. She in turn becomes the spokesperson as well as the torch-bearer of the so-called womenfolk. Instead of sitting back in a complacent manner courting the routine chores of domestic circle, Janaki summons the uninvoked yet most devoted inner feelings of a woman. The urge to express her identity has been revealed in multifaceted ways. She faces all odds and responsibilities with a fierce determination that has always been lurking beneath her mind. She can be undoubtedly coroneted as the true amalgam of a liberated soul. This is vividly exemplified in the portrayal of Janaki. The quintessence of her very self is exemplified through the minute details which form the crux of the novel.

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