

Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises* a Dichotomy of East-West Marital Order and Disorder

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Abstract

Jaishree Misra, a feminist Indian novelist, intricately paints the picture of Indian middle class social life in her novels. Her novels realistically exhibit the subtle realities of a woman's life. The discrimination against a girl child starts at home and extends to educational and socio-political system. Jaishree Misra has written more than ten fictional works and the theme of woman oppression and ill-treatment of girl child at home is recurrently discussed in her novels. Her novel *Ancient Promises* depicts the vulnerability of the traditional social order. As the title suggests, the traditional social set-up fails to fulfill the promises it guarantee a girl child. The author depicts the worst form of domestic violence against a girl child who dreams high and has a yearning desire to reach greater horizon. The plight of the female protagonist Janu, forms the central theme of the novel. Janu belongs to Maraar community a high caste Hindu family. Traditionally people who belong to Maraar community perform music at Temples which belong to the kingdom of Cochin, Travancore and Malabar. Janu who belongs to an orthodox Hindu family struggles to find free space in the socio-religious order. Janu's western education gives her the strength to carve out a free space for herself. But the deep rooted values which she has inherited from her lineage haunt her throughout her life. The tormented soul of Janu is vertically split between the value system of oriental and western.

KEYWORDS: women, social order, oppression, domestic violence

Introduction

Jaishree Mishra was born in 1961, in a Malayali family in New Delhi. She had a modern life in the metropolitan city. She had her PG degree in English Literature from Kerala University. She is exposed to both the life of rural as well as the metropolitan way of life. The author right from the childhood understands the social order which denies free space for women folks. The world today discriminates women by earning, work status, education and social welfare. Most women are dependent on men and they mostly do the household activities like caring the children, and other house dependents. They don't have equality and not treated equally also. They even don't have freedom and in some cases due respects is also denied. But recently the concept has changed as they seek their own identity, individuality, equality, respect which will help end male domination. Jaishree Mishra belongs to the period where voices against women oppression is frequently heard at least in metropolitan cities like Delhi. Jaishree Mishra a woman writer from Kerala is grown up in a leftist political environment is certainly influenced by the

communist ideology. The feminist movement in Kerala set the tone for many of her novels.

Jaishree Misra believes that woman is not born but rather become. It is only a woman who could bring out the power of woman and their value, importance, self esteem and thus claim equality. The author believes the social transformation should be all inclusive and cultural, ethical, linguistic and gender oppression end. And this leads women to claim their rightful place in the society by encountering the traditional ideas of the male dominated system. Today many women writers attempt to come out with their feminine individuality and try to establish their rightful place in the society. The feminist writers question the male oriented writings and began to retort. They are aware of their place, position and status in family and society. They are being conscious of the rights as a human being and try to fight for equality and respect. They are even ready to challenge the man himself to be known automatically. Jaishree Misra belongs to the tradition of feminist writer who speaks about inclusive social environment where man-woman relationship should be revised and revised.

Jaishree Misra's Feminism

Jaishree Misra writes boldly of the man-woman relationship in her novels *Secret and Sins*, *Secret and Lies*, *Rani*, *Ancient Promises*, *A Scandalous Secret* and *A Love Story for My Sister*. Marriages of Aman, Riva, Susan and Kaaya show the various aspects of marriages present in our society. Thus Jaishree Misra's portrayal of our society with relation to women gets authenticity. The theme of marriage and its problems are recurrently discussed in her novels. Marriage is an ancient socio-religious institution which is complex, ambiguous and mysterious. The institution of marriage has facilitated itself as a bridge to reduce the gap between free flow of instinctive passion and laws of socio-cultural values. In other words the objective of marital institution is to reduce pain and make the bondage between the two genders; man and woman stronger and healthier. But ironically the function of marital institution has degenerated over the ages. In the bondage between man and woman the system provides more power for one man and woman is considered an inferior and other. Jaishree Misra's objective is to raise series of questions about the marital system which treats woman as a commodity in the marital market.

Jaishree Misra's writings do not abandon man completely. Her protagonists search and long for a partner who understands and accepts them completely. In their search to find a partner who promises to reduce the burden of both the social and psychological pains end a failure. Jaishree Misra believes in the concept of platonic love between man and woman. Her protagonist longs for a happy life with their marital partner. But ironically their dreams are never fulfilled. Their desire for marital love leaves them dejected. In other words Jaishree Misra is not a radical feminist like Shobhaa De and Anita Desai. She does not prescribe complete abandonment of the traditional social system. But she advocates changes and transformations. She believes that the blending of east-west ideologies can bring peace and harmony to the man-woman marital bondage. Shobhaa De a radical feminist writes about radical and liberal feminism. Jaishree Misra can be compared with Shashi Deshpande. She certainly falls along the line of Shashi Deshpande who believes in strengthening the marital system. But writers like

Kamala Das, Shobhaa De, Anit Desai, Bharati Mukerjee and Arunthathi Roy completely wants to wipe out the system of marriage which they believe is the primary reason for women oppression. Jaishree Misra is an optimistic claims that the east-west cultural blending can liberate both man and woman from the shadows of socio-religious fundamentalism.

Ancient Promises

Jaishree Misra strongly claims in her novels that the western education can liberate woman from the clutches of the inhuman male domination. Women education and occupation in the new society as social status helps them to be independent economically and socially. In this connection Jaishree Misra has contributed a lot through her novels. In *Ancient Promises* Janu gets married by the pressures of her family especially by her father. Her friendship with a boy was neglected. Before Marriage, she is shown as a typical South Indian family woman and girl.

But after Janu's marriage, there is a reverse and revolt against the male dominated society. She gives divorce to her husband (Arjun). She boldly marries her boyfriend (Suresh). It all took place due to the education she received and by having been a member of a working class. She also has the braveness to live with the mentally retorted girl child Anjali. She even tries to educate her child. The women of modern times are conscious of their self, individuality, social status; image, rights, self esteem and day today live in their life. Jaishree Misra has given in her novels a image for a new women through her women characters. Janaki, a Kerala backgrounded girl falls in love with Arjun.

Janu's marital life with her husband is a big failure. She reflects over her life. She did not like her life with Suresh and the Maraar family orthodox setup and so she did not like the ways she was treated by them. Janu reveals her inner trauma as:

Janu yearns for a baby imagining that it would help her to get the acknowledgment and appreciation of the Maraars. But when she gives birth to a mentally retorted female child, all her dreams are shattered to dust. Above all, she is more dumbfounded by the mentality of the Maraar family towards her child. During the course of time, she comes to understand that her daughter Riya will never catch the attention of anyone in the Maraar family including Suresh, her husband and the father of the child. Normally it is believed and traditionally viewed as a punishment or wrath of God for their or their forefather's sin. So the Maraar family considers Riya, a disgrace to their family and decides to keep her with a servant unwilling to take her to outer world. And thereafter, life with a retorted child seems a never ending struggle for Janu and she gets empowered to empower her child. Janu feels and says, but a child like Riya, left unloved, would simply wither and perish. Couldn't they see that her kind of innocence could only understand love and not the lack of it? My own rights had not seemed worth fighting for, but Riya needed me to be her voice and a battle on her behalf would be far more satisfying. I was soon going to become the thorn in the Maraar side. (*Ancient Promises*,132-133)

Jaishree Misra depicts the pathetic state of the protagonists who is doubly oppressed. Here the author entangles the life of a marital and woman and her girl child and

splendidly pictures the atrocities levied against them. The orthodox Maraar caste Hindu family consider girl child as a sign of ill omen. But Janu gives birth to a mentally retorted girl child which is almost considered as a grievous sin. The family believed that Janu's previous birth's sins and her present life's sins have bundled up to take the shape of a mentally retorted girl child. After she delivers Riya she is toally alienated from her family. Her husband Suresh and her in-laws treats her as a outcaste. She thinks that a child and a job would change her life. Her child Riya is born with learning disability. Due to this defective daughter, the Maraar family hate both more before ever. Finding no other way Janaki has to take her own role as women and also as a mother of a child. In this context, Jaishree Mishra's view of women take a new form and thus she breaks the traditionally concept of women. Thus we find Janaki attempt to have a different life. She divorces her husband and returns to Delhi.

The decision to divorce her husband is a significant deviation from the fundamental pattern of patriarchal system. Here Jaishree Mishra poignantly expresses her views about the problems of marital disharmony. The author states that western education can liberate woman from the cruel chains of fundamental elements. She goes to England for Special Education for her child. In the later half of the Novel Jaishree Misra shows Janaki as a powerful, brave, independent woman who challenges the Indian social setup. She faces all problems boldly. From Janaki's life we come to know that total freedom is possible as she was determinant to make herself free from the oppressed and depressed life. Jaishree Misra paints the concept of new women through Janaki who is strong and determinant character.

Misra vividly portrays how the elders in the family are involved in taking the decision of Janu's marriage, where, her life is being decided without the knowledge and a word of covenant from Janu and how she was kept in darkness and also how, she, as a Kerala belong traditional woman accepts to be a silent observer of the household happenings. It is customary that before marriage both bridegroom's and bride's family elders will sit together to discuss over the marriage related conventional and ritual dealings and fix a date for engagement and marriage. On this day of betrothal, which forms a part of marital celebration, the fiancé and his family members call on the bride's home and confirm the marriage bond by exchanging promises. So marriage life starts with the promises of the elders and then on the day of marriage with the promises of the spouse and thus it is basically an exchange of promises or a sacred institution built on promises, promises alone and nothingelse. It actually a promise exchanged between the bridegroom and thr bride to be faithful to each other. In all these happening, in which Janu is or is supposed to be the key person, as it is only a decision about own her life, has no roll to play and she remains silent as per the tradition the society found in Kerala. Jaishree Misra rightly opens the novel with the note of Janu's divorce with Suresh.

My marriage ended today. Without the lighting of oil lamps and beating of temple drums, but in a cramped little divorce court, in the manner of these things. Ma had said, as we left the court, her voice and eyes brimming with sadness, that it had been my fate. I had replied, attempting to comfort her, that I thought endings were really only beginnings in disguise. I'm sure she wanted to believe me, but she was still silent as she looked out of the bus window. (*Ancient Promises*, 3)

Conclusion

Jaishree Misra's theme is women's suffering and women's struggle for autonomy. We find women as dislocated and displaced in the society. Her women character attempt to escape from the undesirable experiences they encounter in the family situation. In *Ancient Promises*, Jaishree Misra fills the colour of new women through the character of Janaki who rebels against the patriarchal society by breaking the traditional values and norms. Life seems futile and results in identity crisis when individuality is lost as it is the cornerstone of one's life. Jaishree Misra wrote to prove a woman's image as a source of life, power, energy and individuality. In the Maraar family Janaki loses her identity as an individual. It seems throughout the novel never in any time that her protagonists look back their former life with contempt or regret. Instead they take it as a pass-by event during their other walk of life. They never think about their events in normal day-to-day life and when chances help them to be back in the same event it seems that either willingly or reluctantly they live back the same with full mind. They once again go back to their normal life. In other words Jaishree Misra's Janaki represents the millions of mutilated multitudes of women who lose their identity in the battle against the socio-religious political system. Jaishree Misra ends in an optimistic note and states that the amalgamation of western women emancipation principles and the eastern marital institution can solve the problem of marital disharmony and can change the fate of millions of women who encounter gender oppression all around the world.

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