

# Affliction of Marriage and Agonization of Motherhood in Jaishree Misra's Ancient Promises

Sharon Britto. S

Student, Department of English, Bishop Agniswamy College of Education, Tamil Nadu Teachers' Education University.

## Abstract:

*Ancient Promises*, published in the year 2000 is Jaishree Misra's first and most significant novel. It is semi-autobiographical, based on Misra's direct experience of life. Misra focuses on the plights and quagmires, stress and burden of women, and on the men who remain unaffected by the adversity of women. *Ancient Promises*, is a delicate description of a girl's endeavor to find her place in life and society. It focuses on the dilemma that women face in day-to-day life. This showcases the subordination and suppression of women in the institution of marriage. Janaki, the protagonist's quandary is scrutinized in this tale in which she hesitantly accepts to fulfill her parents' desire. The novel elaborates the journey of Janaki through love, marriage, motherhood, and divorce. This story throws light on the infirmity and anguish endured by women. This paper concentrates on the affliction and agony faced by the protagonist in the name of a girl, woman, and mother. It scrutinizes the miseries of Indian women under the tyrannical system in a patriarchal society.

**Keywords:** Ancient Promise, Janaki, marriage, suppression, motherhood

## Introduction:

In *Ancient Promises*, the protagonist Janaki (Janu), a Keralite brought up in Delhi falls in love with a north Indian boy named Arjun Mehta. Her orthodox parents are against their daughter's unorthodox behavior and disapprove their relationship. The lovers are forced to drift apart. They both go on separate ways. Arjun goes to London to pursue his higher studies and Janu is brought to Allepey. To sustain their family reputation Janaki's father decides to get her married. Several marriage proposals are examined and finally, a match with the Maraar household is fixed. As Janu enters her married life she is disturbed by the tornado of events that takes place in her life.

Jaishree Misra's female protagonists are well-educated women. She is not against marriage but is against the compulsion of one to get married. Misra's *Ancient Promises* is a significant depiction of the way a woman is treated in a quintessential Indian family and society. Women are alleged to perform in a particular way according to certain rules and codes of conduct fashioned by society. An image of the so-called optimal woman is constructed by society. To attain this rank, a woman should restraint her speech, be forced to wear saree and society permitted clothes, restrict her movements, and finally diminish her identity to the subaltern status of the 'other'. It is a general propensity of man to control, repress and enjoy his power and authority over anything and everything. These distinctive roles of man and woman are conveyed through values, customs, laws, and social duties in Indian society.

‘Family’ in the Indian background plays a significant role in deciding the social hierarchy and gender discrepancy. Family emphasizes and educates their children to follow the hierarchal system. They advise their male children to be authentic and commanding, and the girl children to be gentle, kind, tender, affectionate, devoted, and unassertive. These notions of female and male fitting behaviors are not only linked with the construction of the society but deeply recognized by men and women. Being the financial support of the family man takes an exceptional position in the family. Women are only expected to implement the household duties and nurture children. This discrepancy in the status of their roles and the disadvantages of women compose them to be more prone to oppression and differentiation in society.

A girl has a lot of regulations and stipulations and a boy on the other hand has none. The social arrangement in India consists of institutions like caste, religious practices, joint family, and values where women have the only subordinate position. The institution of marriage diminishes the movement of women as independent people. Her status changes from a ‘woman’ to ‘wife’ and later to a ‘mother’. Her roles change frequently. She is no more considered an independent individual but a dependent one. The purpose of her life changes gradually and others are unwilling to give importance and individual freedom to her. Finally, she gets confined to the four walls of the kitchen. A woman is always portrayed as a subordinate to a man who rules the family.

Marriage seems to be an obsessive theme with Misra. *Ancient Promises* conveys to us how marriage becomes a robust weapon in the hands of a so-called husband in oppressing and subjugating women. Patriarchy emboldens women to envisage marriage as treasured and mandatory which is shown as the apotheosis of a woman’s destiny. A girl gets trained in the family to prepare herself for a safe entrance into marriage for her successful stay in her new home. Staying out of this is often perceived as daring deviance because “All girls have to get married someday” (66). As a result of the hierarchical structure of marriage, women are often stifled and any form of female activism is considered as defiance. Asma Shamail points out, “The Indian system of arranged marriage institutionalizes the lack of fulfillment of feminine desire whereby woman become tokens of exchange within the patriarchal economy that reinforces male guardianship of woman” (65). Marriage in Indian culture involves transferring the child’s ownership from her father to her husband. The girl now belongs to her husband.

Janaki, the protagonist of Misra is forced into an arranged marriage. Since Janu is born and brought up in a family environment that instills in women the virtues of obedience and modesty, she is not able to share her love and reject the marriage proposal. She feels that by doing so she would harm her family’s reputation. During the marriage ceremony, Janu learns of the submissive role she will be expected to play as a wife: she should follow her husband’s footsteps, obey him in all matters, and always be his shadow and not his equal. Janu expresses: “While walking around the flickering vilakku 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). The inner turmoil of Janu is expressed while she is getting married to Suresh.

When Janu begins life as a wife in the Maraar household, she is inundated with many “dos and don’ts: she is supposed to speak only very little because brides were expected to be bashful” (86). As a result, she learns her first lesson: taciturnity is better for a wife than verbosity. However, she struggles to fit into the definition of an ‘ideal’ wife. It is easy for the Maraar family to assign her the responsibility of childcare and mothering since they have already forced her into the role of a feminine ideal. It is not long before Janu and Suresh’s marriage becomes one of habit and ritual, which is characterized by dullness and boredom. Under the watchful invisible eye of the patriarchal panopticon, she is forced to remain in the

cultural space of the family. It seems as though she is surrounded by people, yet she is lonely, destined to suppress her voice despite desperately wanting to express herself. Invisibility and silence, characteristics associated with a perfect Indian wife, became the characteristics of Janu as well. The results are that she is reduced to a docile, subordinate person who is incapable of speaking her thoughts.

Janu believes that having a child will make her problems in the Maraar household easier to resolve than completing her BA degree and becoming employed. She will be praised if the baby is a boy since he will be the long-awaited grandson of her overbearing mother-in-law. Then she would “receive a sort of double promotion” (113), that is she would “be elevated to the position of Good Mother and Good Daughter in Law” (113). During the joys of motherhood, she also expects her husband Suresh to be more compassionate to her. He becomes progressively distant during her pregnancy. Janu was moved by the birth of Riya and expresses her feelings as “here is the thing that would grow up to be the light of my life. She was a pink and purple walnut but I could see already that she was going to be my transformer of sad things to Good. My potential best friend” (116). When Suresh received the baby, he laughed uncomfortably. The gold ornament he bought before the baby was born was meant for a boy child. This implies that the Maraar clan was expecting a grandson rather than a granddaughter. Janu was optimistic that they would ultimately embrace Riya. The hope that Janu had that motherhood would help to elevate her status in the Maraar household is unfulfilled. The child she has is unfairly compared to the children of her elder sister-in-law. It comes as another thunderbolt to her when her baby is diagnosed to be “definitely mentally handicapped” (127).

Her daughter Riya has been diagnosed with a learning handicap, giving the Maraar family another cause to disregard the mother-daughter duo. Janu completed her BA out of boredom and her MA due to her determination. Her education, which was also her lone lifeline from their miserable existence, was the only weapon she had left to fight against the odds. As a result, Riya became a vehicle for Janu’s empowering self-identification. This transition from victimhood is lengthy and painstaking. Janaki, interestingly, abandons her ambivalent position and becomes openly defiant at this moment.

### **Conclusion:**

Janu’s path is one of self-discovery and identity. Her sense of self is torn between two cultures. The culture she observes at home differs from that observed at her in-laws’ home in Kerala. Janu reclaims her identity as she decides to end her marriage’s shackles. Janu is a new lady when she returns to Kerala after gaining enough confidence in Delhi. She is now self-assured and outspoken, and she no longer faces any difficulties. Janu’s struggle is more complicated since it entails moving from one household realm to another, from her husband’s domain to her lonesome existence. As a result, a woman’s identity in India is decided by males, which fundamentally impacts a woman’s spatial movement. One can observe the various sorts of oppression and suppression and the suffering that the woman endures in their personal and marital homes from Janu’s narrative in the novel. Janu makes attempts to escape oppression by living in seclusion. Motherhood is an important experience for women, according to Misra, but she does not constrain a woman’s role in society to motherhood, nor does she limit motherhood to biological maternity. The preponderance of her mother figures is self-assured, strong, and resolute.

## Works Cited:

1. Misra, Jaishree. *Ancient Promises: A heartrending story of love and family loyalty*. Penguin Books, 2000.
2. Misra, Jaishree. *Accidents like Love and Marriage*. Penguin Books, 2001.
3. Mitra, Zinia. *The Concept of Motherhood in India: Myths, Theories and Realities*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020.