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Women Existence in Jaishree Misra's Ancient Promises

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Abstract

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. Transplanted from her home and the familiar world of Delhi at the age of eighteen to a highly conventional and aristocratic Nair family in Kerala, suffering from the pangs of separation from her first love, married to a man who is neither good nor bad but simply an 'expert in the art of escape', and surrounded by nasty and sly in-laws who will never let her belong to their world, the problems Janu has to face are numerous. All her efforts to endear herself to the family of her husband, which includes even begetting a child who is supposed to bridge the gap between herself and her new family, are in vain. It comes as a terrible shock to her when her child is declared 'mentally handicapped', but her intense attachment with the baby forms her best protection, and surprisingly, also her means of salvation. She starts rebelling against the snobbish conventions of the family, and slowly there emerges the first faint outline of a plan of escape. She manages a foreign scholarship to go abroad, and it is then, when she is almost ready to get out, that the panicky husband and in-laws try their best to stop her. The last step in this man oeuvre is to take away her daughter Riya. Still she goes to London and completes her course. These are her stolen days of perfect happiness with her lover Arjun. But she must return to Kerala to get her Riya back, because she believes that a life of happiness built on the pain and sufferings of other people cannot last. There is a hole in her soul which only her daughter can fill. Thus her return to Kerala is at the risk of losing even the only other happiness of her life, that is, Arjun. Back in Kerala, things suddenly turn out in her favour, she gets the divorce, Riya is returned to her, and she is ready to start a new life with Arjun. This paper analyses how Janaki, a woman molded according to the dictates of Manusmrithi emerges as a new empowered woman who controls her destiny. Janu disrupts the mould in which she has been created by the patriarchal society. The novel ends optimistically and the author's note in fact reveals the ultimate gift that Janu receives at the end as an ancient promise fulfilled.

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INTRODUCTION

Today the world is enthralled with images of women who is working with men and participating in almost all fields. Even they have got fundamental importance and recognition [1], [2]. In spite of this recognition of the fundamental importance of women achieving the vote, attention paid to the history of its long struggle has been marginalized. And, the reasons for the depth of its opposition ignored. Why, for example, did it take until May, 2005, for women in Kuwait to finally achieve their full voting rights in their national elections? But in this progress gender role is also

very important. It depends totally on view that how a man is behaving with woman [3], [4]. Is he interested or feeling joy in helping them, for the development of society or he is doing it just because he has to... Writing about gender roles of the 1950s, Betty Friedan once defined the “suburban housewife” as “the dream image of the young American woman” [5], [6]. Just as prescriptive literature of the 19th century geared to the middling classes emphasized women’s “true” place in society as mother and wife, the 1950s saw an ideal perpetuated in books, magazines, movies, television, songs, and ads that depicted the white, middle-class woman fulfilled only by a happy man about 41,500,000 of the adult women in the United States are married. But 21,327,000 others are women without men: women who have never married (11,822,000); widows (8,047,000) and divorcees (1,458,000). This means that women are getting along without steady male companionship [7], [8]. How do they adjust to this fact of life? How do they like their man less lot? What do they do about changing it? Do they want to change it? [9], [10].

Material and Methods

Wonderfully Jaishree Misra has characterized her men character in her novels that how a man can help women positively because in three of her novels *Ancient Promises*, *Afterwards* and *Rani* the role of men is equally important. Now the question Jaishree poses, Janu faces, and the reader wants to pursue, is this: what we call life, this life with all its sufferings, acts of injustice, and rationally incomprehensible puzzles, like, why should innocent people suffer, should people accept suffering as their fate, should we break the cycle of karma and rewrite our story as we like, etc., well, does this life have a design or is it all merely chance? If there is a God who is at the helm of affairs, has he made a mess of things? Or to put it simply: what are we to do with this life when we find ourselves at odds with its main current? Perhaps this is the single, most important question that, since time immemorial, sages and philosophers and great novelists have been trying to tackle [11], [12]. The attitude Jaishree takes towards this question is perhaps more important than the answer she gives. It is the inexplicable suffering of innocent children that makes Ivan ‘return his ticket’ to God’s kingdom in *The Brothers Karamazov*, the same which generates and justifies the atheism of Tarrou in Camus’s *The Plague*, the very same which turned Mulk Raj Anand into an atheist at a very early age itself. Now let us see how Jaishree Misra deals with this issue. Janaki, or simply Janu, the heroine of *Ancient Promises*, presents this question in the very beginning of the book. She wonders, “If some God had finally given up his endless task. Had finally drowned all his tools in sheer despair at the weight of errors and mistakes that He simply wasn’t able to control anymore” [12], (p.5). She was not sure whether it was her mistake or His; “was it a mistake at all or part of some grand plan? That’s what I want to think it was. A grand plan, ancient and meaningful and free of blame” [12], (p.5). She is sure that there has to be a reason for everything and that nothing can happen without a reason. And the whole of the story succeeds in bringing out this conviction in a forceful and convincing way. Even as a young girl of eighteen, Janu was fully aware that the responsibility for her actions rested entirely with herself. It was her decision to marry Suresh. Even though she did not like it a bit, she acknowledges with hindsight and mature wisdom: “I had been meant to come here all along. It had all been written so many centuries ago even the writer would have struggled to remember where the real meaning lay” [12], (p.7). It is only vanity to believe that our stories are only ours. We are only minor characters, nothing more than a speck of dust in the grand design. Janu believes that “our destinies and our many pasts were combining in a grand dance so meticulously choreographed; we could easily delude ourselves into believing we were making it all happen” (40). Of course, at first she was scornful of the blind acceptance of everything, and felt that it must be “a petty poor God who couldn’t even seem to get right who was deserving of punishment and who wasn’t” [12], (p.143). But both her mother and grandmother were typical oriental fatalists who might ask: “What was the point in going on about something that could not be changed?” [12], (160). What we suffer in this life is caused by something we did in an earlier life, though we can never know what it is: “I would never know what ancient promise I had made to her, just as Riya would never know what deed had robbed her of words in this life” [12], (160). Any effort to reject one’s lot in life is to fight the gods. But later when she walks into the arms of Arjun, she feels equally certain that it is also meant to happen. Arjun must also be related to one of her previous lives: “Was it because that was what meant to be because of some promise so ancient I could not even remember it now?” [12], (206). It is interesting to note that it is the same idea of ‘ancient promises’ made in some other life as the justification of present experiences that makes her both accept her lot and fight against it at the same time. This is the philosophical basis of the whole novel and it needs further looking into. Her first affair with Arjun is almost like a dream. Her marriage into the Maraar family is the reality into which she wakes up. After ten years, when she steps back into her dream at Delhi, she is so much distanced from her married life, both emotionally and geographically, that the reality looks like some previous life, a kind of misty dream. It had all to happen like that. Nothing is wasted; nothing is meaningless. She had to sacrifice ten years of her life, ten long years to pay off some unknown debt from a previous birth to the Maraar family, and that is the price with which she buys her future happiness with Arjun. Her forty-eight weekends with Arjun at Milton Keynes are ‘stolen’ or ‘borrowed’, and for her to start a new life of her own, she has to get her daughter

back. Now what are the things which distinguish this tale from the all too familiar one of a woman leaving her home to run away with a lover? First of all, it must be remembered that her art of characterization sees to it that no character other than Janu receives the 'close-up'. For example, Arjun does not appear as a 'real' character throughout the novel, and it is especially so in the first part. This, I think, is both deliberate and significant. He does not somehow belong to the real world so that we do not pass any judgment on Janu when she decides to marry Suresh. If the character of Arjun had been developed more thoroughly and if we had witnessed his pain and disappointment at her betrayal, our response to Janu's action could not have been as unequivocal as it is now. The same argument is true about Suresh too, for given a glimpse into his thoughts and feelings at her betrayal; it would have been difficult to withhold moral judgment from Janu's actions. Similarly, when Janu rushes into the arms of Arjun, and as she enjoys the moment of bliss without guilt, we are convinced that it is beyond blame. For one thing, the dream like figure of Arjun does not seem to be real enough to bring in moral censure. What she experiences then is a moment of pure bliss, uncontaminated by any bitterness or selfishness or even a sense of taking revenge on her insensitive husband. The purity of her experience is thus affected, by a two-way action, which while cutting off her husband from the picture on one hand manages at the same time to sublimate the lover into an ethereal image so that the question of praise or blame does not occur. Another important device that helps Jaishree to complete the picture of Janu is her daughter, the mentally retarded Riya. If Riya had been a normal child capable of missing her mother, her inconsolable sorrow would have definitely cast its disquieting shadow on Janu's one year in London. The reader accepts the situation because he knows that the needs of the child which are mainly confined to good food and fine clothes and some looking after can be as well met by the father, or even a good servant. But the final flowering of Janu's personality occurs when she decides to risk her life of happiness with Arjun for the sake of retrieving her child. Thus it seems that the thorough representation of Janu as a full-fledged character achieves its poignant effect to a very great extent from the semi-representation of other characters as vaguely perceived entities. Janu's experiences are typically those of a migrant. Rushdie once wrote: Migration across national frontiers is by no means the only form of the phenomenon [13], [14]. In many ways, given the international and increasingly homogeneous nature of metropolitan culture, the journey from, for example, rural America to New York city is a more extreme act of migration than a move from, say, Bombay[15]. Born and brought up in Delhi, when Janu is married to a Nair family at Valapad and moves over to Kerala, she encounters all the bewildering experiences of a migrant, both on a linguistic and cultural level. Even before her marriage, she had realized her paradoxical situation: "That these two places [Delhi and Kerala] ran together in my blood, their different languages and different customs never quite mixing, never really coming together as one" [15], (p.18). She grew up in Delhi "with Malayali parents but Delhi friends and Malayali thoughts but Delhi ways" [15], (p.18). Soon after her marriage, her mother-in-law reminds her: "Like it or not, you now live in Kerala, so I suggest you drop all these fashionable Pleases and Thank You" [15], (p.80). Her Malayalam was woefully inadequate, and the usual mixture of English and Malayalam simply would not do there. Speaking in English would be deemed stylish; her brand of Malayalam always provoked sarcastic laughter. So she was forced into monosyllabic replies. Delhi did not like the Kerala in her and Kerala resented the Delhi about her. She exclaims: "Half-way children, we could have founded a world-wide club of people belonging nowhere and everywhere, confused all the time by ourselves . . ." [15], (pp.169). Later in England, in moments of crises, as for instance when she is being questioned by the Immigration Department, she becomes aware of the quality of her English deteriorating, as "my Indian accent was squeezing its way out, sending my tongue into overdrive" [15], (p.290). It is obvious that language has played a crucial role in making her predicament hopelessly awful. Close on the heels of this linguistic disorientation follows the cultural dislocation. Though she hated Kerala often, she would miss it too, as Kerala was in her blood. But her main problem was in getting accepted as a member of her husband's family. For this, she had to transform herself into someone who was totally different from her actual self. On the morning of her wedding, after the make-up is completed, she looks into the mirror and sees a stranger looking back, 'a proud product of Preethi's Beauty Parlor' [15], (p.72). Her in-laws dress her up in a Maraar sari and Maraar jewelers and turn her into someone else. She muses: "I stood in front of them, a counterfeit Maraar, hiding Delhi insides and a very heavy heart" [15], (p.92). Even little things seem to accentuate her oddity. "Even a badly hung blouse could announce to everyone who walked past the washing line that there was an intruder in their midst, one that could never ever measure up to the others" [15], (p.109). In short, though she was never beaten up, though nothing really terrible had happened to her, there was only "a long and constant catalogue of very small things, . . . so small and so subtle as to be almost invisible, could not do any grave damage, just rob me gradually of my knowledge of myself" [15], (pp.110-11). Suresh never bothered to find out what she thought or how she felt. As far as she was concerned, he never existed really. Thus her earnest efforts to be a good wife and an acceptable daughter-in-law were dissatisfied, partly by the insensitivity of her husband, partly by the devious nastiness of her in-laws, but mainly by the alien customs of a narrow-minded society, a system which was hostile to her true inner nature. Her firm refusal to accept her share of this 'forced' happiness is indeed heroic. Nowadays, terms like 'honesty', 'sincerity', 'integrity' etc., has become somewhat outdated in literary criticism. But Ancient Promises makes its

impact mainly through the writer's honest approach to life, and as a female Bildungsroman, it makes its mark with astounding clarity and intensity. Janu has fought her fights with unrelenting determination, and in the course of the whole novel, never for a moment does she become selfish or inhuman: she has never betrayed her true self. And that is not something we can say of many people.

Results and Discussion

Janu's father was totally against the concept of love marriages. He had never liked young people falling in love nor wanted his daughter to get influenced by all the 'love' ideas that go around her. In *Ancient Promises*, the mistake is on both the parents and the child. Janu accepted things as they came, in order to satisfy her parents. Then again, Janu's parents kept her affair with Arjun in mind and felt that their daughter can be safe and secure only if she enters into wedlock. They failed to understand that it is a process of growing up and their daughter would understand herself as she grows. Children absorb new culture and ideas at a young age. Janu's idea of 'dating' looks strange and shocking to her parents. Jaishree Misra emphasizes the urgent need to restore culture in its right perspective. The author, in her novel *Ancient Promises*, takes effort to make her readers understand the full spectrum of emotions, from the heights of total delight to the depths of grief, as children grow from babyhood to adulthood. In the beginning, couples enjoy their new role as parents. But, as their children grow, they create unwanted anxiety in parents. Jaishree Misra overtly conveys the message that parenthood is complex as it involves a relationship between two different generations. The incident of raising children can be an assorted bag, of both joy and sorrow. Men, as well as women characters in her fiction, react in different ways to the Indian culture and Western culture. Indian women writers in recent decades have produced abundant literary output. These writers probe into human relationship since it is closely connected with the mind and heart [16], [17]. In order to make the process of change smooth and really meaningful, women writers have taken upon them-selves this great task of their crusade against established traditions. It is only after the Second World War that women novelists of quality have begun enriching Indian fiction in English [18]. Of these writers, Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai are unquestionably the most outstanding. Many women writers have tried their hands in the field of fiction/novels. Earlier, novels focused the social and political issues of the society. There were stereotyped productions or portrayal of women characters and their roles. It is also true that they were mostly produced by male novelists. Therefore, they were the lopsided presentation because they reflected the views, estimation of women from the understanding of men. They were the reflections of the male opinions and experiences. After sometime the scenario has changed. The novelists desired to expose the society and express the psychology of people.

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