
Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises*: A Story of Love and Family Loyalty

Talluri Mathew Bhaskar

Lecturer in English

ABSTRACT:

*Fiction writing has become a popular form with Indian writers—good, bad and indifferent. Fiction especially is not only an aesthetic enjoyment for readers but also acquires power in the hands of competent writers. It generates a scope for change and development. The autobiographical genre evolved in the fiction and took the world by storm. Of late, Jaishree Misra has written a semi-autobiographical novel, her first novel, **Ancient Promises**. Misra believes in 'Malay Karma' which in Malayalam means ancient debt or that joy and sorrow follow each other in a cycle. In her very first novel, Jaishree Misra consciously sets out to blur the truth and fictionalise the story because she believes that is the real job of the novelist. The protagonist of **Ancient Promises**, Janaki bears close resemblance with Misra. They both have gone through the up and down of life. The novelist has attempted to write a semi-autobiographical novel where the facts have been interestingly mixed with fiction. The pitiable plight of the women in marriage as wife, daughter-in-law or later widow as seen in Misra's novel makes the novel a realistic, contemporary, social document of the actual status of women in India today. Janu's journey though long and traumatic, makes her stronger and eventually brings her peace. The novel deals with marriage, divorce and motherhood.*

KEYWORDS: *Love, family, loyalty, Malay Karma, marriage, divorce.*

The woman in India has long been worshipped using the choicest terms of address. But the woman of independent India is not ready to enter another abysmal era of blind hero-worship. With cumulative wisdom being passed down to her through the ages, she has learnt to recognise herself. The spirit of revolt arisen out of mechanical life, mismatched marriage and wayward ways of the husband have forced the woman to come out in the open to register her dissent. Jaishree Misra is the writer of this decade. The protagonist's life runs parallel to that of the writer. Many of the characters and of events bear close resemblance to the real-life characters and events. The novel is divided into three parts and eighteen chapters. Janu, the protagonist was born in Kerala and brought up in Delhi. So is Misra. Janu is a Malayali Nairgiri born and brought up in Delhi whose father was an air commodore in Delhi. Janu (Janaki) lived in Delhi for the first eighteen years of her life. The narration moves to her journey from innocence to experience. She is brought up in a very traditional Malayali family. Her mother is a teacher. The western lifestyle gets deeply rooted in her mind during her childhood. At the age of seventeen she meets a young man named Arjun. He is a cricketer at the local school. At first Janu falls in love with Arjun. Their love blooms into romance. Events take a drastic change when her father's friend sees her on Arjun's bike when she should have been in her maths-tuition classes. Jaishree Misra says:

I am not Janu, just as no character is ever quite the one it is based on. It is true that I did fall in love at seventeen. I, too, lost my teenage sweetheart to an English university and an arranged marriage. We met again, after a ten-year period of silence, in circumstances not dissimilar to those described in the book, effectively ending my marriage. I do have a Riya, with a learning disability, and as dear to me as notwithstanding, all through the writing of the book I found I was quite consciously setting out to blur the truth and fictionalise the story, precisely because that was what I believed a novelist's real job was. (p.307)

Janu's love develops in her friend Leena's house. Janu's lover, leaves for England for his higher studies. He announces his plan of joining his mother in England. Janu is literally put under house-arrest. Her parents take her to Kerala. She feels doubtful of her future with her lover, Arjun. She has little choice. She is sure that her long wait for him would be futile. She is with her grandparents. Her parents want to get her married off. Janu writes a letter to Arjun explaining this:

I'm sure we both knew this was coming, so here it finally is. I'm getting married in two weeks's time. To a businessman who lives in Kerala. I've met him once, he seems pleasant enough. I don't suppose you want to know much more about him, and there's little more I can add to that description anyway. (p.63)

Janu agrees to marry according to her parents' wishes. She marries into the Maraar family. The narrator says:

'The Maraars are an old and gracious family; half the families would have died for an alliance like this...' (p.66)

Mrs. Kannan Menon avers in one of her articles:

One does not even know whether the person one is supposed to wed is good-natured or otherwise, good-looking or not; and so on. A woman's duty is to present at the fixed hour of marriage in the prearranged place and then to suffer all the harassment, privation and frustration caused by that husband.¹

Janu is one of the Indian girls who have grown up with the notion that marriage is the only goal to be attained in life—the only aim of the married women in our country is to lead a life in the path trodden by these (Ahalya, Sita, Draupadi, Tara, and Mandodari) sacred and much revered women in Hindu tradition. Devaki Jain writes:

These (Ahalya, Sita, Draupadi, Tara, and Mandodari)..are the Pancha Kanyas. What a colourful variety of examples they represent! They are neither saints nor virgins. None of them is heavenly...and all are wives and mothers. For the ideal of Indian womanhood is the mother, the one being in creation, lowly or highly—placed, poor or rich that, though rooted on earth, is godlike in her capacity for unbounded love and devotion with no thought of any return or recompense.²

Janu wants to complete her B.A degree. The Maraars promise to allow her to complete her studies. Unwilling to hurt the feelings of her parents, Janu gets married to Suresh at the age of eighteen. Her husband belongs to a socially respected Maraar family. She makes a sacrifice for the sake of the family. Janu has to now ensure that she fits into the mould of the ideal wife—the Hindu Pativrata (Chasteful woman) taking into account the complexity of life, different histories, cultures and different structures of values, the women’s question, despite basic solidarity, need to tackled in relation to the socio-cultural situation. The impact of patriarchy on the Indian society varies from the one on the west and therefore the Indian women novelists like Jasishree Misra have tried to evolve their own stream of feminism grounded in reality. They have their own concerns, priorities as well as their own ways of dealing with the predicament of their women protagonists. *Ancient Promises* is a novel which is a scathing denunciation of the secondary, subordinate position accorded to women even in a progressive matriarchal society like that of Kerala. The protagonist finds herself in a loveless marriage from where she makes a painful journey towards a discovery of her true potentiality. Janu’s husband is a spineless one with probably no individuality of his own. He shows little interest in his wife. On many pretexts, he prolongs his stay outside the house. Janu tries to fit into the mould of a true, meek and submissive wife. The Maraar family never wholeheartedly accepts her. They expect her to follow the trodden path of a dutiful Hindu wife and an obedient daughter-in-law. She finds herself isolated with no feeling of familial bonds. In course of time, Janu gives birth to a little baby girl, Riya. Unfortunately, Riya is mentally challenged girl. She needs a special care and attention than normal children do. Misra says that she too has a Riya with learning disability. Suresh, Janu’s husband, shows no interest in his daughter Riya. When Riya was born, Janu’s sole hope for happiness got shattered. When Dr. Vijaya said:

*‘This child is **deffinitely** mentally handicapped. There is **no** doubt, see she has all the features, high arched plate, tongue-thrust’ conducting with a flourish, ‘in fact I think that she will never even speak.’ Amma nodded her approval and Dr Sasi-the-famous-nephrologist congratulated his friend on her expert diagnosis.*

(p.127)

Suresh is indifferent to the feelings of his wife. When she complains about Gowri’s rudeness towards her, he brushes aside her complaints. He says that Gowri wants to tease Janu. He says:

‘Don’t be so sensitive. Your problem is that you’ve been an only child, you’re obviously not used to family life.’

(p.97)

She wants to discuss the matter with him but he never gives her a chance to share her feelings with him. She understands that her husband is an escapist. In her in-laws’ house, Janu becomes a laughing-stock. Her lack of proper Malayali knowledge is laughed upon. She never gets love and affection for which she longs from them. The loneliness that she experiences in her new surroundings is further compounded by the fact that Suresh never seems to notice or respond to his wife’s moods or emotions:

He didn’t seem to notice at all – as I didn’t then – that there were hundreds of opportunities like that one, missed carelessly and without thought for the price we

would have to pay later. Tiny little chances to ask each other how we were feeling. To take and share our thoughts and learn to become friends. (p.90)

Widows are relegated to a subordinate position in a progressive so-called matriarchal society like that of Kerala. In the house of widows like Ma and Ammumma, only a 40-watt 'bulb' burns. Widows have nothing to look forward because they have been deprived of their husbands. There's is a life in death. Janu says:

My grandmother's house was already a joyless place of prayer and old memories, without menfolk whose footsteps would be anticipated every evening and for whom special food could be cooked. Once the evening lamp had been lit, this was the sort of house that closed its doors. There was also nowhere that either Ma or Ammumma could go once the temple round had be done. Only women who had the good fortune still have lives with their men went out after dark, to the cinema and restaurants and other people's houses. These pleasures had passed for my mother and grandmother and an unspoken sadness had descended over the house that had once joyfully received hordes of children when the schools closed. Now it looked with half-shuttered windows, only dimly shining its forty-watt presence behind two huge mango trees. Despite the occasional temptation, I truly did not wish to add any more sorrow to that house.

(pp.144-145)

Jaishree Misra opens for the readers a vista of real-life incidents and experiences which at times seems stranger than the fiction. She takes the liberty to narrate what she finds worth narrating, at times concealing facts and creating some fictional characters. In the novel, Janu's in-laws suggest her that she should leave the child, Riya to the care of their servants. Suresh leaves for trips and tries to avoid the family as much as possible. In that family Riya seems to be an undesirable and unwelcomed one. The Maraars never care for Janu and their mentally retarded granddaughter Riya. Janu feels unhappy at their unkind and merciless attitude. Dr. Dinesh Singh's words deserve mention:

She (Janu) attempts to explore and found a new social order to find pertinent resolves to the real problems in the light of traditionally gendered role playing.³

Janaki's love affair with Arjun in her teens, a forced arranged marriage with Suresh, an unhappy marital life, careless attitude of her husband, humiliations and insults from her in-laws and mentally challenged girl child Riya weighed down upon Janu. But she endured all these things with her overwhelming patience. It is only much later in life that Janu has mustered her courage to walk out of her home and marriage; but even that is only after she had been seen by a world famous and expert psychiatrist Dr. Krishnan Menon who had pronounced her suffering from delusions:

I have no idea, to this day, how long I lay there in my stupor. I had been taken to the mental patients wing at Trivandrum Medical College. Dr Krishnan Menon, another old crony of Dr Sasi's and, needless to say, a-world-famous-and expert-psychiatrist,

had seen me and pronounced me manic and suffering from delusions.
(p.227)

Janaki decides to take Riya to Arizona where she can admit her to a specialist school for children like Riya. She wants to continue her education by getting admission for M.A in special education. She needs much money for the treatment of Riya and for her education. She applies for scholarship. She leaves for Delhi to attend a scholarship-interview. Now she is eager to see her lover Arjun in Delhi. Old passions arise and she realises the need to meet him. She visits Leena, her friend in Delhi. At Leena's residence Janu meets Arjun. Janu tells her husband that she wants to file for divorce to end their miserable marriage. Their conversation reflects their mind:

'Suresh, I have to ask you . . . please, I don't want to hurt you . . . ' I knew I was sounding weak and pleading and not firm and assertive as I'd planned. 'Suresh . . . ' It was coming out now, all in a rush, nothing could stop it now, 'Suresh-I want a divorce.'

He looked at me with a kind of pretend surprise on his face. He wasn't shocked, but I could see he felt obliged to have shock, hurt, horror....We're not happy together. That's the point. I'm not happy with you, I suppose I've never been. It's not your fault, I suppose we are just different. We seem to need different things from life.'
(p.217)

Suresh tries to persuade her to stay back. Janu takes it as an advantage and reveals her love affair with Arjun. She sticks on to her decision of going abroad. Suresh tries to pretend to Janu that he is ready to forget her past and forgive her because of after all, she is his wife. But Janu never forgets her husband. She is aware of the tricks played by her husband. She goes to Arjun's house and there she succumbs to her love for Arjun. Janu begins to respond to every move that her lover makes. The novelist recollects her own experiences which are similar to those of her heroine Janu:

We met again after ten-year period of silence in circumstances not dissimilar to those described in the book effectively ending my marriage. (p.307)

Janu made up her mind to leave for England. Her husband and her in-laws have created many obstacles to prevent her from going abroad. Her husband's ego got deflated as his wife was leaving him. No one in the Maraar family had gone through such kind of experience before. The Maraars admitted her to an asylum. Janu's mother helps to come out of that dungeon. Suresh played another trick by taking away Riya with him. He thinks that Janu cannot live without her daughter. Her life without Riya is incomplete. At last in the legal fight Janu wins. Suresh had to reconcile himself to the divorce and handed his daughter to her mother. He nods for divorce. Janu is not ready to suffer and sacrifice as the traditional Indian women do. She wants to project her image as an individual, free from all kinds of conservative thinking which seeks to overthrow. She is ready to fight her way against all odds coming in her way in fulfilling her aspirations. She rebels against the existing patriarchal quotes and social norms which either in theory or in practice tends to relegate the woman to a secondary place in society. Her rebellious craving for individuality and happiness cannot but result in the breakup of family and

relationships within the family. Marriage becomes meaningful and enjoyable when mutual love and respect are part of the relationship. When Janu tries to love and establish good relations with her in-laws, she is neither accepted nor loved by them. To protect herself and her daughter, she starts revolting against the snobbish conventions of the Hindu patriarchal society. In England Janu meets Arjun and they spend all most every weekend together. Her studies also progress. On her return Janu's mother informs her that Suresh is ready for the divorce and also to return Riya. In search of true love and self-preservation she takes an unconventional step to create her own space and make humaneness triumph over mere customs and traditions. Through her revolutionary decision Janu paves a path to emancipation and establish the right balance between duty and human dignity. Whether Arjun can adjust with Riya or not now no longer seems important. She would go to England with Riya and admit her to the special school for mentally retarded children like Riya. She would give Arjun a chance to accept Riya as his daughter. If it works it is fine; if not she can take care of her child on her own. This is her promise to her Riya. It is an ancient promise every mother makes to her children. It is a kind of ancient dues that she pays. Janu says:

Somewhere in my distant past, perhaps even a thousand years ago I had done something that committed to dedicating this life to Riya's care. Had I been a thirsty traveller at her door and had she taken me in, washed my feet, fed and watered me? I would never know what ancient promise I had made to her, just as she would never what deed had robbed her of words in this life. (p.160)

Now Janu has made her mind up her mind to fulfil that promise. The novel ends on a happy note. In this maiden novel of hers Jaishree Misra seems to be suggesting what Nayantara Sahgal has done in many of her novels. It is seen in the words of Roy:

In her fictional depiction of women attempting to free themselves from repressive relationships, Sahgal is more direct in her feminist sympathies....but she makes a systematic and sustained effort to demolish deeply ingrained attitudes regarding women, before indicating ways in which a new image can be formulated. With an admirable steadfastness, she upholds her commitment to man-woman relationships based on mutual trust and honest communication between two equal individuals.⁴

Ancient Promises is a novel which can be prescribed as a sincere effort of Jaishree Misra. It depicts up and down, success and failures in her life as she strives to take the reins of her life into her own hands. The novel holds the readers' attention and the curiosity mounts with every page. In her author's note Misra says:

While I had, obviously, a husband and in-laws in my first marriage, I wish to state quite clearly that they bear no resemblance what so ever to the corresponding characters in the book. For those of you looking for a sequel, here's one of sorts. I married my Arjun eventually and Riya, happily lives with us. The songs are deeper, certainly. Sometimes sweeter. I hope I remember always to be grateful I had another chance to rebuild that tower in the sky. (p.308)

The novelist believes in ‘Malay Karma’ which in Malayalam means ancient debt or joy and sorrow that follow each other in a cycle. The novel stands for the Odyssey of the novelist towards a discovery of her true potential.

WORKS CITED

- i. Menon, Kannan, K. “Herself—Gender and Early Writings of Malayalee Women”, *Modern Women and their Husbands: A Rejoinder*. Ed. J.Devika, Kolkata: Mandira Sen for Stree, 2005,p.44.
- ii. Jain, Devaki. Ed. *Indian Women*. (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of I&G, Government of India, 1975)p.56.
- iii. Singh, Kanwar Dinesh, *Feminism and Post-Feminism*, New Delhi: Sarup&Sons, 2004. p.2.
- iv. Roy, Anuradha. *Patterns of Feminist Consciousness in Indian Women Writers*. (New Delhi: Prestige, 1999) p.81.