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Turbulence of Identity: Resisting Patriarchy in Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises*

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Abstract

The present paper tries to explore how Jaishree Misra's semi-autobiographical novel *Ancient Promises* looks into the unhealthy customs and traditions which involves female subjugation, suppression of identities and the pitiable voiceless condition of women in India. Misra specifies, how the institution of marriage becomes a burden and how being a hybrid individual can create conflicts in a patriarchal society. The paper explores the journey of Janu who survives the strong clutches of patriarchy and attain self-affirmation. Misra's story reiterates the significance of universal quest of women for self-realization and self-expression. The paper tries to cross-examine the ideas of resistance, cultural dislocation, and the concept of 'unhome' in feminist perspective.

Keywords

Identity; Hybridity; Double Consciousness; Unhome; Diaspora; Jaishree Misra; *Ancient Promises*.

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“She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute, she is the Other” – Beauvoir

Discourses over the issues of gender imbalance and atrocities against women question the roots and established norms of patriarchy. Contemporary women writings examine the changing social scenario and prominent steps towards emancipation of women and eradication of patriarchy in every walks of society through their potential characters. The changing scenario of contemporary Indian women writing in English and other regional languages exhibit the powerful voice and role of women in literature. Contemporary women writing uphold their cause of womanhood through their writing. They have been successful in bringing certain changes and projecting the disparity and existing social inequality. Their writings enable them to raise their voice against social and cultural principles that constrain their liberty and perpetrate institutionalised seclusion.

Jaishree Misra occupies an abiding place among the contemporary Indian women writers in English. She delves into the major issues and concerns of human psyche to depict a clear and real picture of the society. Her novels represent the pivotal themes of struggle, chaos, crisis, role of education, self-affirmation and endurance with a series of potential characters especially women. In her semi-autobiographical debut novel *Ancient Promises*, Misra unveils the moving story of Janaki, a determined young woman and her survival of a set of customs and traditions in a particular society and her journey towards self-realization. The term survival seems self-explanatory. The dictionary

explains the term as ‘out living’ or ‘to come alive through’. It stands for continuing to live or exist.

Being born and brought up in the capital city away from her native place Kerala, Jaishree Misra finds herself a misfit and experiences cultural and social segregation to a great extent. Her tale is about the true India and its culture and a challenging patriarchal regime which should be kept aside for a better future. ‘*Ancient promises*’ provides a wide discussion about the conservative cultural differences and its drawbacks in life and society and it explores the disturbed psyche of the modern Indian woman and her attempts to strike a balance between instinctual needs and intellectual aspirations. Hybridity is an extensively discussed term in postcolonial literature and it refers to the “creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zones produced by colonization” (Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation* 108). Misra cross-examines Janu’s cultural identity from the perspective of Bhabha. Homi K. Bhabha observes it as follows:

It is significant that the productive capacities of the third space have a colonial and postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory... may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of the culture’s hybridity. (Bhabha 108-109)

The present paper explores Janaki’s displacement, assimilation of a different culture and how dislocation and cultural disruption cause multiple identities in a woman in her journey towards self-affirmation. Born and brought up in a metropolitan and capital city- New Delhi, Janu has different outlook and attitudes in every walk of life. Though Janu, is an obedient daughter and bright in her studies, her parents could not digest the news of her having a relationship with a Punjabi boy. They drift her to the native place Kerala out of the blue, into a tremendous alliance from the well-known Maraar family. Thus at the age of

eighteen Janu has to tie the knot with a wealthy man without her consent but with all the blessings of her family. She finds it difficult to adapt to a set of new rules and customs with her new family. The process of assimilation and understanding the psyche of her partner and her in-laws whom she never knew turns her life quite difficult in the Maraar family.

Arjun, Janu's first love differs in every aspect from Janu's family and the difference played a vital role to separate them in spite of their promises to keep their love for ever.

Did we talk off the future at all? Of how we would be together again, somehow, in some distant place? If we did, it would by then have sounded very hollow even to the two of us. There had been too many barriers and gates between us, even when we had lived in the same city. (Misra 52)

Ancient Promises clearly talks about the conflicts and concerns of the diaspora. Janu, the second generation diaspora fails to connect the emotions of the concept of 'home' and 'culture' to her parents native place Kerala, though it was her favourite holiday destination during her school days. For Janu, the homeland is where her culture and language has been formed. Her parents desire to settle back in their homeland is juxtaposed to Janu's emotional bonds with Delhi. As she says, "Home, for virtually all my life, had been Delhi. Big, busy, bustling New Delhi" (Misra 18). The notion of diaspora revolves around the relevant issues of Individual identity, 'Home' and the question of belonging. The complex idea of home denotes,

Where is home? On the one hand, 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, or the excitement of the first snowfall,

shivering winter evenings, sombre grey skies in the middle of the day... at this, as mediated by the historically specific every day of social relations. (Brah 192)

In *Ancient Promises* Janu's parents share an emotional attachment to their own land, where they have the longing to go back, to settle and relish the culture that formed their identity. They share the clear views of sentimental community of first generation diaspora and very eager to maintain their cultural ties strong with their homeland thus rushes towards an immediate decision of marry off their only daughter to a well-to do family in Kerala. They were afraid of their daughter going away from their culture and homeland. Diaspora entails a "dislocation from the nation-state or geographical location of origin and relocation in one or more nation-states, territories or countries" (Briziel and Mannur 1). According to Stuart the experiences of diaspora is characterized,

. . . not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity, which lives with and through, not despite, difference; Hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (Misra 235)

Janu laments about marriage to the conventional family where women has no voice to express their views on anything. Janu curses the age old customs and cultural barriers for keeping her away from pursuing her dreams. She fails to get her in-laws care and attention because of her having a hybrid identity. They place Janu in a different category and questions her diverse identity. She is never treated as one among them; she is always the 'Other'. Maraar family treats her as an outsider because of her Delhi life and English education and they never let her to be a part of the family. "Look, you're not in Delhi anymore. 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" (Misra).

According to the in-laws, Janu never would understand the values and traditions of their family like Kerala born daughter-in-law do and she cannot fit-in the picture of an ideal daughter-in-law. They never let go a chance to make fun of her in the name of her Delhi life and education and never gave proper attention to her eagerness to pursue B.A. degree in distant mode and her internal struggle to accomplish it amid several duties and responsibilities. Her husband Suresh never tries to establish an intimate relationship with Janu and she did not try to win her husband's attention. She could not accept her husband wholeheartedly and cannot replace Arjun. She does not want anybody to snatch that place and break her sacred bond with Arjun forever. Janu makes up her mind that Suresh has a meagre role to play in her life as a strange spectator. "It is the Maraar's I had married not Suresh. He had not been unkind but had not seemed to want to spend much time alone with me" (Misra 87). She recollects Suresh's conditions for marriage:

1. She has to be pretty.
2. She has to be young so that she would adjust.
3. She has to be able to speak English so he could take her to Bombay in the hoped expansion of his motel business.
4. Nothing else was too important (Misra 96)

Janu feels isolated everywhere in Maraar's huge mansion though it is a hub of activities. Janu's isolation can be connected to the concept of unhome in its wide perspective. Janu fails to accept the new land into her emotional psyche in spite of her being a daughter in-law in the Maraar household. The in-between state of mind and internal conflicts has been discussed in deep by critics like Bhabha and others. "To be unhomed is to feel not at home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself: your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee, so to speak" (Bhabha 421). The Maraar's segregation of Janu's hybrid entity and linguistic assimilation provide the readers with enough source about the force of patriarchy which existed in the

particular caste group in Kerala. On the other hand Janu's educated husband would like to take advantage of her English education as Misra describes, "Could take her to Bombay in the hoped-for expansion of his motel business" (Misra 96). Janu's double consciousness and cultural differences are always looked down upon in the Maraar household and her attempts to assimilate and understand the customs and traditions get ignored by them.

Janu fails to get the attention of her husband after breaking the news of her pregnancy to him. Her husband's indifference startled her as she thought the baby can get a passport to the indifferent world of Maraar's. Janu's world goes upside down with the harsh revelation about Riya's disability. She is shattered by the callous truth about her little one, and does not want Riya, the only companion in her journey towards self-affirmation, undergo any hardships in life. Misra describes, "The world was spinning around me. No other being existed in that swirling universe, just a heart- broken, wailing baby fused to my body on an Argos sofa. Together we swirled through this shocking new sorrow" (Misra 127). Misra's detailed narration shows the significant developments in Janu as a mother, her rebellion against the age old tradition of a silent wife and subjugated identity of a daughter-in-law. This breaking orders and roles opened up many opportunities for her to escape from the weird world of Maraar's. Janu reaches the verge of escape by managing to get a scholarship from America for doing a course in special education and thus provide Riya a better treatment. Her motherly concern for Riya and the unexpected meeting with Arjun paves way for her pursuing identity and succeed to get divorce and making herself free of the fateful orders of society. Janu's double consciousness helps her in London life in order to cope with new culture and a new life with Arjun and Riya, full of hopes and promises.

Misra's novel delves deep into the internal psyche of the issues of 'home' and 'unhome'. Janu's unhomeliness is a key concern to discuss under the light of diasporic theory and the double consciousness of multiple hybrid identities.

The very concept of 'home' is complex in diasporic discourse as there are multiple belongings.

Scattering leads to a splitting in the sense of home. A fundamental ambivalence is embedded in the term diaspora: a dual ontology in which the diasporic subject is seen to look in two directions- towards a historical identity on one hand, and the society of relocation on the other. (*The Postcolonial Studies Reader* 425)

Ancient Promises can be categorised as modern women writing which discusses the realms of patriarchy and its multiple effects on women all over the world. Misra empowers her protagonist with a potential to fight back against the unwanted customs and rules of society. She is much different from the age old stereotype women portrayed throughout the world writing. Misra indulges in the multiple notions of hybridity, internal diasporic conflicts and the longing for belonging through the psyche of young and vigorous Janaki. In her *Writing Diaspora*, Yasmine Hussain says, "Culture is not genetically inherited but is instilled by upbringing within a given cultural context or a given set of parallel contexts, within which an individual has to learn about such ideas of race and gender" (3-4).

Most of the South Asian women writers talks about the immigrant issues of home, cultural dislocation, multicultural identity in a wider perspective. The literature always faces a space issue and in-betweenness like most of its characters. What makes the immigrant survive in the foreign land is the major question widely discussed among the women diaspora writers. South Asian women diaspora writers experience a mixed cultural hybrid upbringing. They have multiple voices and multiple identities acquired through their cultural conflict and displacement. Their works carry autobiographical elements and deals with the alien cultural contrast and isolation. Their characters, especially women characters are displaced and isolated ethnically and try to reach new horizon with the expected changes in the society.

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