

Journey of a Woman through Home, Hearth and Heart: A Reading of Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises*

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Abstract: This paper endeavours to render a feminist reading to *Ancient Promises*. The article analyses how Janaki, a woman moulded according to the dictates of Manusmriti 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.

Keywords: subjugation, liberation, woman, patriarchy, empowerment

"Women's revolution is... an ontological spiritual revolution pointing beyond the idolatries of sexist society and sparking creative action in and toward transcendence... It has everything to do with the search for ultimate meaning and reality, which some would call God". (Beyond God the Father, 6)

The status, treatment and role of woman in any society come from the worldview of its philosophy/civilization. There are two principles in the creation of universe itself. There are male and female principles underlying our entire philosophy, seen as the essence and the manifestation, root and the spreading. These two principles are inseparable and complementary. Essentially both are same, but they are two aspects of the reality. Thus if principle of existence is seen as male, then principle of creation, pervasion is the female principle (the Siva-Sakti symbolism). They are inseparable like seed and the tree, word and its meaning, energy and its potential to work. These two qualities are represented by two colors, white and black. The former symbolizes pure existence, the latter pervasiveness. In fact the entire universe is a play of the duals - consciousness and energy. And at different levels duality governs the entire creation - eternal-phenomenal, manifest-un manifest, mass-energy, life-non life, male-female. (Hindupedia)

Manu Smriti talks of three stages for a woman:

1. As a child protected by her father: Traditionally, girls did not receive a formal academic education. A woman's role, considered essential in preserving social and cultural values, was learned in the home.
2. As a married lady, protected by her husband: Hinduism places great value on pre-marital chastity and this has significantly influenced practices. Girls were betrothed and married at a very young age. In married life, the wife's roles were centred on the home and she was not burdened with contributing towards the family

income. Fulfilling one's responsibility as a loving and available parent was considered paramount.

3. As a widow, protected by the eldest son: If the husband died or took sannyasa, then the widow would be looked after by the eldest living son. Elder ladies were always treated with great respect. (Wikipedia)

Jaishree Misra in her debut novel *Ancient Promises* portrays her protagonist as a young woman who has gone through the first two stages as exhorted in *Manu Smriti* and later emerges out of the cocoon of patriarchy out of sheer determination. Misra's semi-autobiographical novel is an elaboration of Cixous's *Laugh of the Medusa*. In it Cixous announces, "Now women return from afar, from always: from 'without' from the heath where witches are kept alive, from below, from beyond 'culture'". Women must write, must speak out of an authentic sense of their on differentness, their own body". Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resource of the unconscious spring forth"(250). "My marriage ended today"(3). With this stark remark begins *Ancient Promises*. "Ma had said, as we left the court, her voice and her eyes brimming with sadness, that it had been my fate"(3). "Janu's life till her divorce echoes Gloucester's words in *King Lear*. "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods/ They kill us for their sport"(36-37). Fate is the true protagonist of the story, who makes Janaki or Janu, the central character, go through a rigorous rite of passage, sets her free only after she pays a heavy toll for ancient promises, she comes to believe she must have made many lifetimes ago. Misra's choosing the name for her protagonist itself has got its own undertones. "Janaki" is one of the epithets for Sita, the principal female character in epic Ramayana. She is esteemed as a standard-setter for wifely and womanly virtues for all Hindu women. Sita is known for her dedication, self-sacrifice, courage and purity. "Sita's story is illustrative of subjugation of women in Hindu culture especially in comparison to Durga the symbol of female raw force"(Wikipedia). Sita has been portrayed as an ideal daughter, an ideal wife and an ideal mother. Misra's christening her protagonist after an ideal female character in the epic is itself significant. Janu, the protagonist, undergoes ordeal in her marital life and she "fits the damsel in distress stereotype waiting to be rescued by a man" (wikipedia). The protagonist of *Ancient Promises* is empowered through her education which eventually helps her to sever the marital bond with Suresh. When Janaki sheds her "Sita syndrome" (wikipedia), she is able to assert herself individuality. The incidents in Janu's life has got resemblance to the fate of Tess in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. The belief that the order of things is already decided and that people's lives are determined by this "greater power" is called fate. Many people, called fatalists, believe in this and that they have no power in determining their futures. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Tess has no control over her own destiny, try as she may. She was controlled by the "great power". Like wise the protagonist Janu in *Ancient Promises* too has no control over her destiny till she becomes the mother of a child with learning disabilities, but unlike Tess she gains control of her destiny and empowers herself to emerge as a bold woman who shapes her destiny.

Janu in *Ancient Promises* is an iconoclast who adheres to the “revolutionary moment” as Julia Kristeva remarks: “If women have a role to play . . . it is only in assuming a negative function: reject everything finite, definite, structured, loaded with meaning in the existing state of society. Such an attitude places women on the side of the explosion of social codes. With revolutionary moments. Kristeva notes the dilemma women find themselves in vis-à-vis the symbolic. Either they can enter it and become the functional men or can “flee everything considered phallic to find refuge in the valorization of a silent underwater body” (166). Janu's embracing of the wedlock at her eighteenth birthday can be read in terms of the protection that a woman seeks through marriage. Simone de Beauvoir accuse women of collusion in allowing themselves to be defined as Other. But de Beauvoir sees the reasons for such collusion as lying in the fact of women's dispersion- that they have never collectively identified themselves as a subject, as *We* (xviii). And she suggests further that women are seduced by obvious advantages that come from accepting the role of protected object- it is much easier than accepting responsibility for one's own life.

When Janu got married to a traditional maarar family in Kerala she is confined to the four walls of her marital house. When her husband was out on business tour she remains at home under the reign of a domineering mother-in-law who never spares an occasion to find fault with her. She passed her days in a rich and traditional Malayali family dominated by women with thick swaying plaits, whose swishing silk saris hide sharp innuendo. Rabuzzi argues that “the masculine mode of being has typically been that of questing, where the traditionally feminine mode has been that of waiting” (143-145). The woman's life does not follow a line of progressive, linear change and “achievement”, rather it is repetitious, cyclical and static. “Women's housebound time is typically characterized by amorphousness or circularity or both... above all it is static” (146). However, though the philosophy of determinism and fatalism are the undercurrents that run through Janu's life and the novel, she dares to challenge fate and wins. She says, “I couldn't help wondering if some God had finally given up His endless task. Had finally downed all his tools in sheer despair at the weight of errors and mistakes. He simply wasn't able to control anymore. And had at last sat down to cry” (5). She believes that her divorce, and, in a sense, freedom from the clutches of fate, appears to come, not from an act of will on her part, but only because even God is tired of it all- tired of his little games. “I'm sorry, I whispered into the wet night. I'm sorry for all the mistakes. But I am still not sure ... was the mistake mine or was it Yours . . . 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” (5).

Narrated in the first person in flashback, Misra traces the events leading upto Janu's divorce, as she travels back home from the court on a rainy night in Kerala. Technically, therefore, the story begins with Janu and Arjun accidentally meeting outside their school gate in Delhi. Janu is the decoy for her flirtatious friend, Leena, who wants to meet Jai from the boy's school next door. On hindsight, Janu wonders if the chance meeting

with Arjun was fate's sleight of hand planning "Something so big I was certainly not to know of its existence then... Something old and timeless and unstoppable had been set into motion again. Something packed full of dangerous promises" (21-22). Even if she had known the havoc their love would wreak, she realizes that it would not have stopped their surreptitious meetings, until one day, her parents discover it. She is in the final year of school then and after finishing school, she is married off into the wealthy and snobbish Maarar family on her eighteenth birthday. Her journey through the home becomes more meaningful when she surrenders to her parents wishes by bidding adieu to Arjun. As the only child her bond with her parents makes her sacrifice her love for Arjun because she says she is "tired of fighting off my family". Even if she believes that adolescent love, however strong and deep, will not be able to survive the onslaught of family and society – "he was the wrong age, wrong community and came at the wrong time" (26). She resigns herself to her fate and writes in her last letter to Arjun: "Your world and mine have grown so far apart, I reckon I've lost you anyway..." (64). Arjun's world now is a college he has joined in England. Her familial ties makes her forget her first love and enter into a wedlock with Suresh. Ridden with guilt for the pain she has caused her parents by transgressing the boundary they had set, and daring to fall in love, she looks upon her marriage to Suresh as compensation- "to ensure that I began to pay off some of the debts that had accrued against my name somewhere" (68). She knows she can make people she loves happy "in one fell swoop", by this one act. In a way she also finds a sense of inevitability in the sudden sequence of events. "I had been meant to come here all along," she says. She later analyses it: "Weddings were decreed in some otherworldly place where accounts were being totted up and evaluated who should marry whom... and already our destiny's 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" (39-40).

Her journey through the hearth begins when she is transplanted from Delhi to Valapadu, a conservative small town in Kerala where she tries to "put down roots" and "attempts to survive." But she is never allowed to. She soon realizes that the soil she has been replanted into is "hard and unyielding." For her domineering mother-in-law, the overbearing sisters-in-law, she is always going to be the "fashion", "city-type" outsider, not schooled in Kerala's ways. Her indifferent husband is too busy to notice the adolescent's lonely battle against the family's veiled jibes that tear her self esteem to shreds. In a desperate attempt to gain respect from her in-laws, she remove the Copper T, which she has been fitted with under her mother-in-laws supervision, and gives birth to Riya. Her hope that motherhood will improve her status in the household remains unfulfilled. She tries to find emotional sustenance in her child, but her world comes crashing down when the baby is diagnosed to be "definitely mentally handicapped". She thinks that this would be a shared sorrow- "being able to cry together must create the strongest of human bonds". But she soon realizes that "Maraars were not the crying sort of family" (131). So her tears over her child's fate are shed in solitude. As she

blunders through her marriage and brings up a child with debilitating learning problem, she reaches to apparently contradictory conclusion, ironically, one stemming from the other. She comes to terms with giving birth to a child with disabilities, by attributing it to her *karma*:

Somewhere in my distant past, perhaps even a thousand years ago, I'd done something that had committed me to dedicating this life to Riya's care. Had I been a thirsty traveler at her door and she had taken me in, washed my feet and watered me? I would never know what ancient promise I had made to her, just as she would never know what deed had robbed her of words in this life. Or how it would be compensated in the next. But somewhere along the way, we had both lived many lives that linked us together now. (160)

Her journey through the heart commences with her thoughts to mitigate the wretchedness of her existence. "If I did leave Kerala with a baby and no education to speak of, how far could I go?" (122) she asks herself. She finds the answer to the seemingly rhetoric question when she decides to get a BA degree in English Literature through distance education. Thus the slow process of her metamorphosis into a bold woman begins. Later on her decision to do a diploma course in special education abroad turns out to be the climax of her journey through heart. Her journey to Delhi to attend an interview which will fund her education in USA, she meets her former lover Arjun and she breaks the first cardinal rule of marriage. Even after many years of separation Arjun loves her deeply and he urges her to apply to a university in London so that they can be together. Janu decides to opt for a temporary happiness knowing that nothing in life especially happiness is ever doled out free, and that "there was bound to be a catch somewhere". She seeks to end her marriage for she and Suresh are "like prisoners who hated each other but were forced to serve endless sentence side by side". When Janu finally gathers courage to untie the knot apparently tied many births ago, she knows the complex process involved. "I was asking of people to go back to being unrelated again. It was amazing to think how often that complication would have seemed reason enough to keep a marriage intact" (241). Janu's decision to end her marriage is an attempt from her part to disrupt Andrea Dworkin's famous saying quoted in On Freud's Femininity, "woman is not born; she is made" (64). Janu disrupts the mould in which she was made by the patriarchal society. The novel ends optimistically and the author's note in fact reveals the ultimate gift that Janu received at the end as an ancient promise fulfilled. Janu journey through home is the outcome of her unflinching love towards her parents, and her journey through hearth makes her adhere to "Kerala's Etiquette Handbook", and her liberating journey through heart gives her the courage to challenge her destiny. The empowered Janu proves that she is not a subjugated woman and challenges the "Sita syndrome" and proves that she is "not an undeveloped man but diverse" ("Princess" quoted in Gibert and Sullivan: Gender, Genre, Parody, 236).

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Poems

- Jasmine Anand

Storm and Urge

Storm and urge run in their ferocious modes
 Both complimenting each other extrinsically intrinsically
 Which madness catalyzes them?
 Madness submitting to an esoteric mystery!
 Both would end after the consummation of their black period
 After they have talked out fully
 Ending into utter silence of deliberate aloofness
 Would the storm catalyze another urge or
 Urge harmonize into
 Another storm and
 Make one feel isolated in isolation?

Yards Responsibility

Within the Drapes of responsibility
 What right do I attest to in the measure of 6 yards
 Chiffon, georgettes and synthetics...
 Succumb to my playful response
 The Pleating attunes me to patient folds
 And the secret knowledge within
 Cottons eye on me with their staunch starchy look
 Ensnaring me in its mesh of responsibility
 Themselves reigning supreme in their indigenous aura
 Testifying and faking a puny responsible me allure'a

