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Construction of Female Selfhood and Self-Identity in Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to give an elusive account of the struggles and angsts women undergo to maintain their self-hood and self-identity. During the course of their maturation, they move from the position of subjection to self-affirmation. The novel, *Ancient Promises*, delineates nonconservative womanhood in its plot. Misra upholds educated upper-class women in these works who have strength of character to rebel against the injustice they face. They expel the staid stereotypical roles circumscribed for women. Janu and her mother in *Ancient Promises* retrieve from the general notion of viewing motherhood as an oppressive feminine trope and attain maturity and selfhood through their motherly obligations. In the novel, Janu maintains an intense relational sense of self with her own mother which helps Janu to have a stable foundation for her role as a woman and a mother. Janu's mother develops a strong subjectivity by fighting against the whims and fancies of patriarchy and becomes an empowered mother. Janu by defining her subjectivity through her intimacy with the mother, not only inculcates her mother's virtues but exhibits the same in her life when she becomes a mother.

Keywords: Selfhood, Self-Identity, Motherhood, Patriarchy, Women.

Construction of Female Selfhood and Self-Identity in Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises*

Jaishree Misra, who is a master in the art of storytelling, succeeds in giving an authentic portrayal of the sufferings confronted by women in male dominated societal framework. Her novels are women-centric and they depict the deranged minds of women who are persecuted in some way. They do not, however, remain docile victims and instead transform into rebellious challengers. Her artistic endeavours are mostly concerned with the gender and socioeconomic difficulties that educated women in twenty-first-century urban India encounter. Her literature focuses on the intimate lives of the female protagonists, particularly the mother-daughter relationship, and the literary images she creates are clearly affected by her feminist ideals and inquiries.

Misra's novel, *Ancient Promises*, is a passionate depiction of the struggle for a new meaning and reinvention of motherhood in the Indian cultural setting. Janaki, often referred to as Janu in the novel *Ancient Promises*, is a major maternal figure who becomes the silent victims of patriarchy's weight imposed on them under the pretext of tradition and orthodoxy. The negotiation of motherhood claiming a place for mothers and maternal themes in this novel speaks about the development of female selfhood in an Indian context.

Ancient Promises emphasises the mother's speech in the middle of her unhappy life in a patriarchal Maraar household. Janu's account details the numerous insults she has received as well as her desperate attempts to gain the good will of her husband and his family, which eventually led to her independence. Through the agency of motherhood, the storyline elevates Janu's subjectivity. In the author's note at the end of the book, Misra confesses that the book is semi-autobiographical. 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 Riya is to her mother in the book. (307)

Despite the fact that Misra boldly sets out to create "her story," she deftly employs the author's licence to weave fact and fantasy together. Misra reveals her motivation in asserting her subjectivity - as a daughter, a mother, a woman, and lastly as a writer - by declaring her novel to be semi-autobiographical through the fictional character Janaki.

Janu, like Misra, is a Keralite from Delhi who is forced to marry Suresh when she becomes eighteen. He is from a rich, snooty Maraar family in Kerala, and after marriage, her femininity is connected with motherhood, as it is with every Indian woman. Janu's parenthood becomes a blemish when she delivers a mentally challenged girl, Riya, and she is only mystified if she has a normal child. Victimhood is boosted in Janu by patriarchy, which makes women feel accountable for their children's failures. The story then follows the clash between the cultural politics of maternity as a cliché and her own personal maternal experiences. Because Riya's physical and emotional growth is limited, the mother is free to express herself more fully. Mothers are frequently considered as cultural transmitters to their daughters, whose primary responsibility is to mould them according to social norms. Janu and her mother, who

have been labelled as deviant matriarchs, however, defy stereotypes and use their feminist awareness to stay autonomous mothers, allowing their daughters to reach autonomy. The novel places a story in perspective that is not reliant on maternal 'othering.' Taking up the roles of both mother and daughter in the matriarchal line, the novel becomes a creation of both the daughter and the mother, according to Janu. The story investigates maternal voices in which women express empathy for themselves while also empowering their daughters. It gives mothers and daughters the opportunity to express themselves.

Janu's self-esteem, self-worth, and morale are all bolstered by her mother's approval. In *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, Nancy Chodorow's writes, "the mother senses a double identification with her own mother and herself through the child as she can relate to the daughter as an extension of herself" (24) becomes relevant in this context. This relation synthesizes Janu to a sociable person both within and outside the family. She further inherits her mother's "good-enough mothering" (33) which instigates the relational capacities in her. Marianne Hirsch analyses feminist object-relation theory and proposes a similar idea: moms remain an important inner object for the mature daughter, even if her identification and differentiation with the mother is not always successful. She states that, "Because of maternal dominance in early childhood, and mother's closer identification with daughters than with sons, women acquired a characteristically feminine, affiliative, and relational sense of self" (*The Mother-Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, 20). Janu's mother instils in her a strong and stable basis for her womanhood. Janu primarily inherits this feminine wisdom from her mother, with whom she shares a history of maternal power. Janu's mother, who conforms to patriarchal family traditions, instils those values in her daughter, prompting Janu to demonstrate them shortly after her marriage.

Janu represents all of the patriarchy's qualities because his mother is a decent wife and mother. This proves Chodorow's concept that daughters "identify with their own mothers when they grow up, and this identification produces the girl as a mother" (31). The first mother-infant relationships stimulate this reproduction of mothering, and its healthy growth lays the groundwork for women's expectations as mothers. In *Ancient Promises*, the opening comments of Janu on her mother show the strong bond between them, "Ma, sitting up as close to me as she could get, seemed to be absorbing some much-needed warmth from our longed-for proximity. It was strange that I'd had to come back to her to be set free again. Almost as if it couldn't be done without that one final blessing" (4). Riya's close emotional bond with her grandmother explains why she spreads maternal love throughout the family.

Even after learning the truth about Janu and Riya's situation in the Maraar household, her mother tries to make the situation more bearable for her daughter by advising her to keep in touch with her husband and in-laws. She understands that, as the weaker sex, they will be scrutinised by society if they defy social standards. As a result, Janu's mother expresses disapproval when Janu decides to leave Suresh for good. Her perplexity expresses an upset mother's fears that her daughter's lonely living after leaving her husband will marginalise her in society. Janu is surprised by her mother's fears about their community, despite the fact that they are members of the Nair community, which is matrilineal in nature and where women have little power. Janu's mother's generation is the first to choose a better life than the basic one advised for women. They are accustomed to tolerance and acceptance, which they regard as feminine qualities.

As a result, Janu's mother is perplexed when she chooses to take matters into her own hands and summons the guts to pen her own story. Despite the fact that she recognises her son-

in-law as a failed husband and a callous cruel father, she opposes her daughter's plan to divorce him since it will be a stain on their family's history. Janu's mother is initially hesitant to accept Janu's advances to make her own decisions about her life due to the overwhelming class and gender consciousness in Indian culture. She is concerned that her daughter would be labelled as a haughty adulteress. In the beginning of the narrative, Janu's mother is depicted as a conventional woman representing traditional culture. However, when she gains a better grasp of the laxity Janu and Riya encounter among the Maraars, she emerges from the cocoon and gains a voice in order to defend them from the disaster. When Janu is silenced in her new household, the new role moulds her into a strong mother who speaks up for her daughter.

After the birth of Riya, it dawns on Janu's mother that the Maraars are not the sort of people they expected for Janu, but a "strange unloving clan" (161). This knowledge enables her to stay by her daughter as she recognises her son-in-law's lack of interest in assisting Janu in making things run smoothly. Her repressed rage reserves a space in which her maternal subjectivity could be voiced when she rejects the thought of putting Janu in a hospital for treatment of her "hysteria." She also demonstrates maturity by refusing to let Suresh take Janu and Riya back when Janu is 'deliberately hospitalised' for neurosis. Her job as a stubborn mother helps her break free from her submissive shell, especially before the Maraars. Janu's mother, who has developed a strong self, allows her daughter enough space to select and behave according to her life, ignoring the jibes of neighbours who have no bearing on their lives.

Janu's mother's growth is vital because she refuses to limit her daughter's subjectivity in the name of culture and succeeds in supporting Janu's autonomy. As a feminist mother, she fosters her daughter's development, which impacts Janu, who follows in her mother's footsteps in fighting for her daughter, Riya. By suppressing her self-identity and self-esteem Janu tries her best to acclimatize by accepting the socio-cultural norms of the society, "...changing my whole personality to fit in with the Maraars" (121). She even thinks, "I know better now, of course, that I was only fooling myself. I had been meant to come here all along" and tries to rediscover her own quiescent sexuality which the Maraars expect from her (7). She transforms into a character who follows their script. She is compelled to wear a sari, wash her clothes properly, attend numerous weddings, and visit strangers' homes with her in-laws. Despite this, Janu falls short of their expectations, and she is ejected from the 'good-wife realm.' The trials she faces as a woman within the familial institution, as well as her rebellious spirit's desire to break out, frequently collide. As a result, her tyranny is primarily carried out at home.

Despite her efforts to restore harmony to her marriage, Janu becomes a scapegoat for the Indian society's hidden contours of casteism, classism, and sexism. Her relationships with the Maraars are shattered because they strive to subjugate her and treat her like the "other." When Suresh accuses her of failing to love his family, she refutes the accusation, claiming that she has demonstrated her ability to love and be loved by others. She demonstrates her sociability once more while working at Sheela Kuriakose's special-needs school, where she is desired by all. When the children's parents come to pick them up from school in the evening, she becomes everyone's mother. Her relationships with others are successful, and she seeks to maintain a friendly relationship with everyone around her throughout the narrative. The Maraars' unwillingness to associate with her, however, widens the chasm between them, straining their bond. Janu decides to become a mother at this point in her life, believing that it will raise her standing in the Maraar household. She strives to find her feminine fulfilment in her role as a mother after being betrayed as a wife and daughter-in-law.

Janu's decision might be seen as a stepping stone toward her self-evolution within her shattered femininity, from a feminist perspective. As Jasbir Jain, in "Indian Feminisms: The Nature of Questioning and the Search for Space in Indian Women's Writing," pinpoints, "Indian women's attempt to redefine freedom should begin with the body and only by the reconstructions on womanhood they can claim a space of their own" (36). Because motherhood is frequently romanticised, Janu sees it as a way to get away from the danger she confronts in Suresh's home. Janu's assumption that having a kid will cure her issues in the Maraar household exemplifies the Indian traditional significance placed on motherhood. The thought of becoming a mother is one of her desperate attempts to gain a respected position in her new accommodation, and it is also an act of self-protection in the subtext. Janu, like every other Indian woman, feels that the ultimate objective of femininity is to become a perfect mother before becoming a mother. Her womanhood is regarded as a mascot of her life, the only area where a woman is celebrated, and motherhood is regarded as a mascot of her life, the only place where a woman is celebrated.

Janu overcomes the dominant belief of relating the 'lack' usually associated with women by the society. Her words, "endings were really only beginnings in disguise" exhibits creative flexibility in her (3). This induces self-growth in her contrary to the inhibition related to the 'lack'. Though Riya no longer provide "a passport to their love and affection," (132) the child animates Janu with a new spirit. Her birth represents the end of Janu's boredom in Suresh's house, enlivens her empty married life and compensates for the passivity the latter receives from her husband. Janu tries to find emotional sustenance in her child, "Very early on there were signs that Riya and I were to become a team. We would in fact become the kind of team on which my sanity would later depend. For the time being, though, she was my hope for the future" (117). She also believes that they are linked through generations and that she no longer requires anyone's help in raising her daughter because she was the one who needed Riya more than the other. The discovery of her latent powers culminates in the birth of a new Janu, who regards mothering her crippled daughter as her Karma and believes she owes Riya a due from a past life, endowing her with a strong sense of responsibility in caring for her daughter.

Misra allows her protagonist complete autonomy in all aspects of her gender, not just in the maternal stereotype. What makes Janu unique among other mothers in the novel is that after identifying her daughter's illness without succumbing to the fate, she deviates from "the unquestioning all accepting eyes of a mother" (129) to a woman who has potentialities to break the maternal silence and vocalize both for herself and for her daughter. Rather than becoming an overbearing mother, she develops into a self-sufficient lady who thinks and acts in accordance with the circumstances. As a result, Riya is rarely a psychological victim of her mother's emotional control. The mother-daughter link is rarely muddled by a lack of language, and Janu develops the ability to interpret her daughter's unspoken words. Riya needs her mother to be her voice because the author limits her articulations and needs. Janu's rapid individuation is necessitated by the lack of a narrative voice for the daughter. This probably gives her the strength to fight back intensely, "Fight, I told myself fiercely, ... fight!" (150) Once the infant is capable of telling its own story, this undermines the universally praised trend of "othering the mother" in maternal narratives.

Janu is awakened by the reality of her daughter's marginalisation among the Maraars. Snubbing Riya causes aggression in her mother space, and when they try to repress her maternal function, she expresses her rage by choosing the latent female power within her. Janu's mother instructed her to keep her emotions in check in her husband's house and to never raise her voice against them, but her dissatisfied pregnancy forces her to battle for their life. In the middle of these overpowering expositions, she understands the need for rebellion for her daughter's and

her survival. Janu's experience of motherhood is heightened and intensified by the triple oppression of class, caste, and gender she faces, which fosters her individuation process. As a result, the family, which formerly served as an oppressive agency, now serves as the primary institution of her subject formation.

Janu's parenting bolsters her femininity in various ways. Before seeing Arjun for the second-time in Delhi, she recounts, "I could be leaving this house with Riya to begin our new life abroad. I had not thought about divorcing Suresh. No one in my family had ever had a divorce. I was satisfied with just getting away and being able to take Riya with me" (153). These firm remarks affirm her autonomy in making decisions about her life. Even though she wants to end her marriage, she is aware that filing for divorce as a woman is frowned upon in Indian culture. Janu only validates her maternal subjectivity when she makes strong human connections with those around her, which is significant. Her maternal instincts are formed and nurtured by her relationships with her daughter, mother, grandmother, and, finally, with Arjun. Parenting as Chodorow speculates, "...is not simply a set of behaviours, but participation in an inter-personal, diffuse, affective relationship" (33). During her travel to Delhi, she meets Arjun and her friend Leena, who renews her energy.

In Janu's emerging subjectivity, the prominent male figures play a significant role. When Suresh becomes a negative male influence in her life, delaying her individuation, Arjun emerges as a positive male influence, teaching her to find delight in fresh beginnings. Arjun reinforces and rather participates in the repaired family unit with Janu and Riya, which not only allows the mother-daughter tie to be restored, but also sets her on a new road in the midst of her married life with Suresh. Arjun provides the emotional support she craves from her spouse. Her relationship with Arjun is compassionate, and she feels free to be herself. He recognises her feminine qualities, and their connection serves as a metaphor for her maturing personality. As a woman and a mother, she is unencumbered by traditional feminine roles. Her desire to start a family with Arjun and Riya rewrites the Indian cultural concept of a wife and mother.

One of Misra's main qualities is the inclusion of good male figures. She is not a man-hater who creates a comfortable and secure environment for her female protagonists in which they are alone. Janu's decision to leave her child in India while travelling to London with Arjun astounds Indian readers who are used to mothers' voluntary self-denial and sacrifice. This may appear to be an unmotherly gesture, but examining it from a feminist perspective reveals a metatext of protest against patriarchal conformism.

Riya demonstrates remarkable maturity as a result of Janu's efforts by expressing resentment towards her mother, who temporarily abandons her for further education. She also gains the ability to 'communicate' in two languages. Riya, while being quiet and inarticulate, assists her mother in discovering her hidden inner potential. These maternal abilities in the daughters help to alleviate the stress that comes with the mother's conflicting dual status. During the course of events, Janu and her mother rise from their passive positions, strengthen one's own individuality, and transform into compelling mothers. Janu protects Riya by rescuing her from the sadness she experiences amid the inattentive kinfolk, just as Janu's mother protects her from her despair in relation to the Maraars.

Janu, her mother, and her grandmother are self-assured women who are always in touch with their daughters. Feminist mothers rarely exert dominance over their moms or children, and they provide them enough room to develop their own identities. This shared knowledge is what binds these women together, as they share a common story of maternal grief, joy, and pleasure.

Despite the text's emphasis on the mythological importance of motherhood, Misra dismantles the myths about mothers that are prevalent in Indian fiction by crafting the story in Janu's favour. One of the main qualities of Misra's focused women characters is their ability to achieve autonomy in unorthodox methods. The story depicts the transformation of silent mothers into loud mothers. Janu's feminist conscience drives her to explore uncharted territory in Indian femininity, valuing both her selfhood and motherhood equally.

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