

**STATUS OF WOMAN IN THE MODERN ERA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO JANAKI
IN ANCIENT PROMISES**

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Abstract

“Brevity is the soul of wit” _ Shakespeare

The world is after rapid development as a microcosm we need to be laconic in the expression with a pregnant idea in order to infuse values into the minds of the modern world. Ever since the dawn of civilization Literature has been pivotal in illuminating young minds with thought-provoking ideas to pave way for equal society. If men and women coexist in harmony as Tagore envisions the world life of every individual would be devoid of stress and strain. Jayashree Mishra has manifested the idea into a fiction called "Ancient promises" signifying the pain and pressure of woman suffering from divergent views like physical, mental and psychological facets. Indeed no woman is an exception be it married or unmarried. She presents the modern society in true colors and Janaki is a representation of every woman in one aspect or the other uttering most emotional words of every broken heart of a woman. This paper emphasizes on suffering and exploitation on a woman by not just woman but the crippled society also educates every individual their duty towards their life in general and beloved in particular be it wife, daughter, mother or aunt. Society is a happy society if women are happy if not it's a concrete jungle of everyday rifts and drifts.

Keywords: microcosm, young minds, Ancient promises, .etc

My marriage ended today.

Ma had said as we left

the court her voice and
her eyes brimming with
Sadness that it had
been my fate!
-JaishreeMisra

JaishreeMisra's first debut novel *Ancient Promises* (2000) is a semi-autobiographical novel of the author herself. This is a story about Janaki (Janu) a Keralite brought up in Delhi. Married-off at eighteen she forsakes her first love Arjun for a loveless, tyrannical marriage in her native South India. Her meek acceptance of the 'Ancient Promises' made in previous lives.

This is all the tragic married life of a young woman Janaki who yearns for true love and yearns to attain the joys of Motherhood. The uniqueness of JaishreeMisra's fiction lies in her treatment of feminine sensibility. In India where women have redesigned role, which does not allow any room for individualism, identity, an assertion. JaishreeMisra talks about the women who question the age-old traditions and want to seek individual growth. They try to reassess the known in a new context and find a meaning to their lives.

It is about why we love and lose, sometimes seeming to
have little control over our destinies. (CP)

Misra suggests that a balance between the conventional, pre-set role of women and the contemporary issues has to be struck. Her female protagonists try to discover and rediscover meaningfulness in life through the known and the established. These characters are not normal but different from others. They do not find a proper channel of communication and thus become alienated and start brooding about their lives. All their wanderings and reflections finally bring them into new vistas of understanding, which they had formerly ignored or rejected. As JaishreeMisra is a perfect artist, her novels naturally offer a wide variety of social, cultural and psychological interpretations.

My marriage ended today. Without the lightening of oil lamps and beating of temple drums, but in a cramped little divorce court, in the manner of these things. Ma had said, as we left the court, her voice and eyes brimming with sadness, that it had been my fate. (1 opening quote)

The present novel *Ancient promises* (2000) is shown through a series of flashbacks. The Protagonist Janaki is the narrator. Janaki is referred to as Janu throughout the novel. Janu, a Malayali girl growing up in Delhi, with Malayali parents finds Delhi friends and gets adapted to Delhi ways. Thus, she decides to fall in love with a Delhi boy knowing that a Malayali home never welcomes him. By taking such choice "...in the manner of the very young and the very foolish...", she glides into many "...troubles without fear or shame". (18)

Two years before her marriage, Janu first meets Arjun, a young charming Punjabi boy, equal to her age. She is enrolled in the Irish convent school because her parents want her to speak English well and get a head-start in sophisticated Delhi society. Arjun is at the boy's school next door, whose population was carefully separated from that of Janu's by "...high bramble hedges and gates that were kept permanently locked". (18) Janu accidentally meets Arjun outside of their school gate in Delhi and Leena introduces her. Janu states:

Something so big I was certainly not to know of its existence then... Something old and timeless and unstoppable had been slowly set into motion again. Something packed full of dangerous promises. (AP 21-22)

The author describes in the above statement that the birth of adolescence love was the beginning where all the dangerous promises set themselves in motion. Discussing the importance of talk or communication in a human relationship, Rollo May, a Psychotherapist in his book *Love and Will* (1969) observes that:

Communicating leads to mutual understanding by strengthening the bond between two individuals. (LAW 247)

The communication between Janu and Arjun ignores the cultural boundaries and strengthened their bond. Janu ignoring the Malayali home traditional values describes her adolescence love to the Punjabi boy. Even if she knows the havoc their love would wreak, she realizes that it will not stop their surreptitious meetings. Janu is flattened by the exotic charm of Arjun. On the other hand, Arjun also gets attracted to Janu. Therefore they get many common topics to share with, and they enjoy talking and sharing their thoughts with each other.

Janu opens her new friendship matter with forced enthusiasm to her mom. Making sure her Dad is not around, she reveals her friendship with Arjun. She knows very well that her Dad never encourages her relationship with a boy. She says:

I was fairly sure my parents would disapprove; I'd heard Dad harrumph loudly at love scenes in films, worried they would fill my head with silly notions. Love, for him, had been the stirring in his heart when his mother had shown him the picture of a fresh-faced girl she'd chosen for him to marry eighteen years ago. This running-around-trees business was for film stars and fools, he often said. (AP 23-24)

Janu wants to show her boyfriend to her mother. She says that they have *loads* in common, similar schools, service background, the same tastes in books and music. Janu's mom shockingly asks about Arjun, 'How long have you known him? Who is he? How do you know him?' (24) Janu boldly replies:

'Oh, Ma! He's a FRIEND just like Leena, Alka, and Anju...' I brought out my carefully rehearsed trump card, 'if he wasn't just a friend, would I be asking him around to meet you?' (25)

But her mother who is brought up in a traditional atmosphere cannot accept this fact and says:

'I don't know,' she said doubtfully, 'I never had friends like that when I was growing up. You have to be careful, you know, there are lots of boys out there who will be only too willing to take advantage of pretty girls.' (24-25)

Misra portrays that a young woman Janu, cannot hinder the desire of her first love, she cannot deny his attraction towards Arjun. Even though she believes that her parents will not accept a non-Keralite boy as their son-in-law, who is too young to her age, she continues to meet Arjun and takes their relationship to another level. Janu feels like:

My insides feel like jelly, my mind's just mush...and all I want now, *from life*, is to be with Arjun again...' 'Take it

from me, yaar,' she said, turning over with a yawn, 'love is a bloody pain in the arse. (32)

Misra portrays Janu as a teenager feels that she has a right to make choices, take decisions and become aware of herself as a person. Jean Maurice de Montremy in *A Writer is not a Professor* (1990) opines that:

Where a free woman has no place to make a choice of her own, Out of this struggle to be free is born a new person who makes choices, take decisions and becomes aware herself as a person, regarding the complexities of the life of a free woman and the ironic nature of the freedom they enjoy. (AWISNP 42)

Dorris Lessing also has commented in the same book:

I was simply trying to understand what was happening to us, to all of us, who refused to live according to conventional morality. And who all encountered, nevertheless, many difficulties, submissive to the point of absurdity in our need to proclaim our freedom. (AWISNP 198)

Janu wants to liberate herself and escape from pressurized traditions, as she deeply adores Arjun, she goes with him on his bike. Betty Friedan says that the core problem of women is not sex but identity which has always been denied to them. Friedan opines about it in her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) that:

For the woman, as for man, the need for self-fulfillment autonomy self-realization, independence, individuality, self-actualization is as important as the sexual need, with as serious consequences when it is thwarted. (TFM 282)

Janaki goes to Kerala in her holidays with her parents every year. When it is the time to go Kerala again, she informs Arjun. He denies Janu's Kerala trip. But she explains to him that it is important for the family to visit her grandparents every summer holidays. She finally convinces him and goes for the trip. In their holidays, Janu'sammumma wants to see a boy for

Janu. But Janu's mother Mani does not want to get her daughter married off at an early age. Mani says:

What are you doing match-making for Janu, Ma? Have you forgotten, she's only just seventeen? She has to join college next year. In these days and age girls don't get married in their teens as they did in our time, do they, Viji? (AP 43)

In fact awareness in a women that she can live in a different way but happy and purposeful life is of no avail unless the patriarchal forces in our society support her and do not pressurize her to accept the stereotype as it normally happens. Here Janu is also facing the same condition but she does not urge for physical needs but urges for kind texture and love, therefore she wants to escape from the patriarchal forces, but her uncle spots her with Arjun and gives complaint about them to her father. When Janaki reaches home unaware of the situation that she had been caught with Arjun and her uncle had given complaint about her, she tries to escape due to which she lies. Therefore her father slashes her, abuses her and warns her if she steps her feet out of the house. As Janu describes:

I had said I was at a special Maths tutorial class when a friend of my father spotted me on the pillion of Arjun motorcycle. (...).when I returned home late that evening my father face was like thunder and I could see that my mother had been crying. My father asked 'Where have you been?' I should have taken a cue from the cold anger of his words and spoken the truth, but instead, I blurted,' Maths tuition... (AP 48)

Misra proclaims in the novel that Janu, who was born in a traditional Keralite family, wants to lead a life of a liberated woman who can make her own choices in her life, but her parents warn her if she crosses traditional bounds. So in order to escape from the threat, Janu lies. Janu can be compared with Krishna the protagonist of RajiNarsimhan's *The Sky Changes* (1991) as Krishna asserts herself: "My body is not my jail. It is my boat. I will row to freedom in my boat." (TSC 30)

The New movement gave authority and authenticity that urged the woman to make their voices heard which is turned equally demanded the attention of the world. A new woman has

come to signify the awakening of a woman into a new realization of her place, position in family and society, conscious of her individuality. The above statement can be strengthened with the opinion of Ellen. E. Jordan who states that:

The English feminists endowed the New Woman with her hostility to Men, her questioning of Marriage, her determination to escape from the restrictions of home life and her belief that education could make a woman capable of leading a financially self-sufficient single and yet fulfilling life. (Ellen. E. Jordan 19)

Education infused necessary confidence in women and soon a large number of women entered many fields of social services like working for prison, reforms, fighting against alcoholism, cruelty to children, Slavery and fought for a feminine cause like reforms in marriage and divorce laws. Janaki can be compared to Aku-nna, the protagonist in *The Bride Price* by Buchi Emecheta (). Aku-nna also as Janaki enlightened by education boldly takes the decision to step out of traditional boundaries with her free choice of Chike, a man of her love. But Janaki can be said to be a stronger character than Aku-nna's. Unlike Aku-nna, who dies in the journey of self-discovery, Janaki seems strong enough to win the battle of crossing the traditional constraints and live confident.

As Meena Shrivadkar in her book *Image of Women in Indo-English Novels-Different Distortions in Feminism and Literature* (1987) observes that:

As women received the education they began to feel an increasing urge to voice their feelings. The awareness of individuality, the sense of compatibility with tradition— bounds surroundings resentment of male-dominated ideas of morality and behavior problems at home and a place of work or in society—all come up in a shelter of projection. (Meena Shrivadkar 20)

The Indian nationalist movement under the leadership of Gandhi led to further emancipation of Indian women in the 20th century by involving them in the struggle of political freedom for the country. With the growth of educational and vocational opportunities, the educated middle class and upper-class women, particularly in urban areas have become conscious of their rights. More and more educational opportunities and employment avenues

were thrown open to women and exposure to reformist movements—all helped woman to go a long way in bringing about domestic changes in their position and attitudes impelled by a desire to realize their aspiration for a new way of life, Women began to voice their feelings freely.

When my deadline approached, Arjun hailed me an autorickshaw on the road outside. He kissed me tenderly before I boarded it. 'I promise I'll be back,' he said to which I couldn't say that I didn't think he would. The feel of his lips on mine was still warm and wet when I saw him mount his motorcycle as the rickshaw-wallah turned his vehicle around. Almost physically unable to let Arjun out of sight, I lifted the back flap of the rickshaw and watched him ride away. In the opposite direction. It was all over. (AP 52)Janu thinks:

‘What about my studies?’ I knew there was no point even mentioning Arjun, but my studies were surely good enough reason to put marriage off for a while. (AP)

But they say that they have already discussed studies in Kerala. They even say that English literature is something that can be done from home. But still she is determined to go to college: *I don't feel ready for marriage... I'm looking forward to going to college here.* (AP 54)

In Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1981), Saru, the protagonist in her girlhood days was influenced and wanted to become a powerful dominating person in her life. This made her realize that she can fulfill her ambitions through education only. In this novel mother of Saru does not understand the importance of girl's education.

But she's a girl... And don't forget, medicine or no
Medicine, doctor or no doctor, you still have to get her
married, spend money on her wedding. Can you do both?
(TDHNT 144)

The socio-political and economic changes during the past three or four decades have altered the position of women in life and literature alike. But the women have yet to traverse a long way towards their goal of taking up their position alongside men on terms of perfect equality. As the Protagonist Janu who wants to liberate herself is forced to tie the knot of marriage. Beauvoir aptly stated above that it is a fact that the number of women with an irrepressible yearning to break loose from the time-honored crippling and iniquitous social laws, condemning women to a role far inferior to that of men is increasing day by day. But it is quite disappointing to note that they too, often, lose their moorings and find themselves in perilously

embarrassing situations. Under the circumstances, one expects the writers to present the picture of a woman who would alter her present plight and open up new possibilities in life. But as Meena Shirwadkar laments, the writers still seem to be interested in showing the actuality of life, when we expect from them the persuasive possibility.

Misra projects the same vital condition of Janu who wants to be educated so that she can attain financial stability but her dreams are shattered when her parents force her to marry after her exams during her eighteenth birthday, she is forced to marry a rich Keralite businessman called Suresh Marrar. Suresh desires about his better half with his parents and he says that she should have the following three qualities in her:

She has to be pretty. She has to be young so that she would adjust. She has to be able to speak English well so that he could take her to Bombay in the hoped-for expansion of his motel business nothing else was too important. (AP 96)

As Janu aptly fits into these three conditions of marriage, Suresh agrees to marry her. Therefore the mighty Maraar clan approving of her so easily puts Janu in a bind. The pressure from her extended family is subtle and incremental. She is forced to tie the knot of marriage. Here the life of Janu is passing through a male-dominated society. The life of Indian woman is so pressurized with traditional limitations and social conditions that Janu's feeble protests are brushed aside, as Janu says:

“...I don't feel ready for marriage and I'm looking forward to going to college here (Delhi), are brushed aside...” (AP 24)

In the same way, Kavery Nambisan shows in her novel *The Hills of Angheri* (2005) about the young lady Nalli

Parents despite their love and care towards their daughters, they bow to the rules of custom and traditions and feel that there must be a male guardian, i.e., husband, for their daughters so that they as well as their daughters to gain respect in the society as well as in their respected communities. This can be compared to the lines of the author in Dilip Tiwana's *A Journey on Bare Feet* (1990): *Girls can't live in their parents' homes all their lives. They must go where they belong.* (AJOBF 61)

In the case of arranged marriages in India, the Indian parents try to arrange the marriage of their daughters as it is taken as an obligatory responsibility on them. Simone De Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* Opines about Marriage that "...it is the destiny traditionally offered by society".(TSS 445) That's why these decent girls obey their parents.

KaveryNambisan's Protagonist:

Similarly, Janu as the only daughter of her parents sacrifices her love and she resigns herself to her fate as she feels ashamed of hurting her parents by transgressing the limits they had set and by daring to fall in love with a non-Keralite. She looks upon her marriage to Suresh as compensation for her sins. As Janu says:

...to ensure that I began to pay off some of the debts that had accrued against my name somewhere, She knows she can make people she loves happy --in one fell swoop, by this one act. (AP 68)

From Delhi, Janaki was brought to a small village in Kerala called Valapadu there she tries to put down roots of bondage with her in-laws and attempts to survive. But she is never allowed to.

At my first Onam, Amma said with a big sigh, "Now I suppose we'll have to explain all the rituals to the little Miss Delhi. If it wasn't for families like our how quickly all our age-old traditions would be forgotten.' (AP 109)

She soon realizes that the soil she has been replanted into it is hard and unyielding, as she fails to impress her domineering Mother-in-Law and overbearing Sister-in-law and tacky turn Father-in-law. She is always going to be the fashioned city type outsider not disciplined in Kerala ways. Her indifferent husband is too busy to notice the needs of his young wife. Janu is left all alone to her fate. However, the reality of life with her new extended family does not live up to expectations.

It can be compared with Shrimati in the gently Falls the Bakula by Sudha Murty:

The protection of women thus became a pressing issue for the society and the men had to shoulder this responsibility. The critical need to protect the women during the ancient period is clearly reflected in the above verse of the Manusmriti: Father protects in childhood, husband protects in youth, and sons protect in old age. A woman cannot be left unprotected. Thus, the

husband became the protector of his wife. This led to social structure in which a wife was expected to cling to her husband for protection. In a male-dominated society, a woman is supposed to be under man's care at every step of her life and she should build herself as an ideal wife, a mother and an excellent homemaker with multifarious role in the family. As a Wife and Mother, Service, Sacrifice, Submissiveness, and tolerance are her required attributes. Excessive endurance and services of adjustments, if a woman adopts these qualities she is admired for it. In the words of Mary Anne Fergusson *Images of Women in the literature* (1973) she opines that:

In every age, women have been seen primarily Mother, Wife, Mistress and as Sex-Object, their roles in relationship to men! (IOWIL 4-5)

For centuries the Hindu women idealized the mythic models from the *Ramayana* and other *Puranas*. Indian women were asked to get inspired by the archetype women like *Sita*, the silent sufferer. Often the Indian woman is passive and accepts the given role in shaping their destiny. At every stage of her life, she is dependent on her status and survival upon Man—her Father, her Husband, and her Sons. The role of a woman has been full of contradictions as far as Indian women are concerned.

Here Janu can be compared to Maya in Anita Desai's novel *Cry, the Peacock*, where Maya is also deprived of marital bliss. Madhusudan Prasad in his book *Anita Desai: The Novelist* (1981) opines that:

Maya's neurosis also denotes a collective neurosis which tries to shatter the very identity of the woman in our contemporary society dominated by a man in which woman longing for love is driven mad or compelled to commit suicide. (ADTN 3)

Marriage in a traditional society is continual self-sacrifice for a woman, a denial of even her selfhood as a person. In the present novel, Janu too is a silent sufferer as she thinks that her marriage was not only unbearable but not even worth living.

She tries to gain respect and love from her in-laws but it proves fatigued with the birth of a mentally disabled girl baby. She was looked down upon by her in-laws for giving birth to a mentally handicapped child. This similar gender-discrimination has been found in Dilip Tiwana's *A Journey on Bare Feet* (1990). Tiwana was born into a traditional family of rich

and prosperous Zamindars. She remembers her mother as a neglected woman in the family because she had not given birth to any son. Tiwana's grandmother never spoke gently to her daughter in law. She rebuked her daughter in law in the worst manner:

What good are you if you cannot give us a son? God, it's our bad luck that you have fallen to our lot. That bride of the Peepal tree house took no time in giving birth to two sons in quick succession. A lucky family indeed! And you? (AJOBF 39)

Companionship' was probably the last word either of us would have chosen to describe our relationship. Would fatherhood change that? Make him *want* to spend more time with me, perhaps? (AP 114)

Motherhood is treated as glory if the Mother could give birth to a Son. Indian sacred books like *Vedas*, *Smritis*, *Samhitas*, *Puranas*, etc, offer numerous illustration of this gender bias society. For example, in *Atharvaveda*, there is a prayer: "Let a female child be born somewhere else, here let a male child be born"(Atharva Veda 2.3). The practice of female infanticide and female feticide has its roots in the golden past of India.

JaishreeMisra in all her novels unraveled traditional gender inequalities and how they are still haunting our contemporary Indian society. Nature created all human beings equally but gender inequalities erupted in society. Misra's novels basically portray quest for kind texture in women's lives in the busy patriarchal society, wherein men have all the privileges, and women are burdened with only responsibilities. Her novels are also built in the question of marriage and commitment in the family system.

Ramabai wrote a book on the high caste Hindu women in which she describes a typical arranged marriage and aptly commented on the conjugal satisfaction of the women in terms of their marriage. Susie Tharu and K.Lalithain *Women's writing in India* (1991) observes:

When the conjugal relation is brightened of mutual love, the happy wife had nothing to complain except the absence of freedom of thought and action; but since wives have never known what freedom is, they are well content to remain bondage (WWII247)

Janu's 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. Her marriage is not unbearable, but it is not good enough, either. Her creature comforts are taken care of, but her life is sterile and stagnant. Her narrow, provincial, Jane Austenian existence – visiting family friends and extended family and attending weddings – drives her to despair. With no sense of self-worth, she feels powerless to fight back. In a desperate attempt to gain respect from her in-laws, she gives birth to Riya. Her hope that motherhood will improve her status in the household remains unfulfilled as she gave birth to a mentally handicapped child. Janu thinks of her daughter Riya:

'Oh I can't wait for you to grow,' I thought, 'I wonder what you'll be like... I hope you have a grand life, my darling...' (AP 117)

After the birth of her daughter, Riya, a child with special needs, Janu realizes that she can no longer live trapped in a cold marriage with a spineless husband and domineering mother-in-law. JaishreeMisra tells the reader in the acknowledgments that this is where the autobiography ends. She thanks DayaMisra is obviously quite unlike Janu's domineering mother-in-law, MrsPadmajaMaraar, who is more interested in maintaining "appearances" among their South Indian society than in Janu or her grand-daughter Riya.

Janu feels that it is unfair to compare her daughter with her elder sister in-law's healthy children. Janu expected a beautiful life after marriage but she became a victim of tragic married life. Anita Rao Badami in *Tamarind Men* (1997) projects where Saroj's mother advises her:

Marriage is a crop that will last thousand years and a women's happiness lies in marriage. (TM 162)

Therefore Janu desires to get out of the traditional bounds and live an independent life. As the author says:

Janu tries to find emotional sustenance her child, but her world comes crashing down when the baby is diagnosed to be definitely mentally handicapped. Why me? Janu asks, unable to comprehend the magnitude and harshness of the undeserved punishment. 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 was not the crying sort of family so, her tears over her child state are shed in solitude. (AP 131)

The life of Janu can be compared to common traditional Indian women where the traditional system extends women's suffering. The law of Dharma approves and affirms her life of bondage. It is the law of Dharma and an overbidding concept of Karma which has contributed to women's tolerance and self-effacement. Even when they are completely crushed by the injustices done to them, they take it as the dispensation of their previous karma. The more the suffering the sooner it will wash away their sins. In a way, she also sees a sense of inevitability in the sudden sequence of events. Janu says that:

I had been meant to come here all along, she says. She later analysis 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. (AP 39- 40)

Janu marries Suresh with an expectation of beginning a new life but she realizes that she is only a namesake wife leading a loveless life by gaining respect and honor of being a wife and mother. Here Janu can be compared with Kalyani in Shashi Deshpande's *a matter of time* (1998). As the author opines:

It is enough to have a husband and never mind the fact that he did not look at Your face for year ... but her kumkum is intact and she can move in the company of women with the pride of a wife. (AMOT 167)

In the traditional society marriage is the promised end, marriage restricts the movement towards a Perception of herself as an independent human being and not buffeted by the circumstance or the social Prescriptions, Marrying Suresh, Janu realizes that it is because of him. On one view, she has a meaningful life as she received the honor of being a wife and a mother; and in another view, her life is meaningless as she is subjected to emotional turmoil. She wonders as to why she in all the way is trying to please her husband, feeling of having lost her independent identity. Her other aunts and for that matter, other woman had surrendered

themselves to the concept of the ideal women, without any independent identity performing all the time self-effacing notions and rituals.

Janu knows quite well that she can never fit herself into the ideal woman compartment, and that she could never think of performing self-effacing rituals, which justified her existence in relation with a man. But in course of her own introspection of herself, she realizes that she is not very different from her conventional female counterparts, for her, she was unconsciously and consciously trying to mold, change and shape herself according to Marrar's desires and needs. Till now, she was independent, intelligent, logical thinker and rational thinker, after her marriage, she becomes one of those archetype submissive Indian women, now, whose identity is only an extension of her husbands. Marriage has taught her things like deception, pretentious and from affection to hypocrisy. Modern, young, women like Janu are bricked a between tradition and modernity Again we get a glimpse about the concept of marriage in Shudha Mazumdar, *A Letter of Life* (1977):

You can't do anything, the housewife should be always joyous, adept at domestic work, neat in her domestic works and restrained in expenses. Controlled in mind, word, and body, she who does not transgress her lord attains heaven even as her lord does. (ALOL 75)

It is expected from a married woman to be joyous and to be dutiful to her husband but Janu who is deprived of independence and kind texture longs for true love and fails to fit in the traditional bounds of marriage. Therefore Janu blunders through her marriage and brings up a child with a weakening learning problem, she reaches two apparently contradictory conclusions, ironically, one stemming from the other. To begin with, she comes to terms with giving birth to a child with disabilities, by attributing it to her Karma. She thinks sometimes like:

Even though Arjun was a lost dream, the thought occasionally crossed my mind that I could still leave Suresh and leave Kerala, perhaps to return to Delhi. (AP 121)

Somewhere in my distant past, perhaps even a thousand years ago, I'd done something that had committed me to dedicate 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. (AP 160)

Janu thinks about her fate that maybe she is indebted to Riya in her past life that she is paying back them in this life and she also thinks that it is the law of karma which is having its sever rule on their lives and they are silently surrendering to it. According to the doctrine of karma:

As a man sows, so shall he reap (Katha Upanishad)
(Radhakrishnan), (I.1.6?)

But Janu wants to rebel against her fate and patriarchal system. Therefore she wants to free herself and her daughter from the miserable conditions like birds in a golden cage. Suresh's increasingly long absences on 'business trips'. And paradoxically, her attempts to find a school that will admit her child opens a path forward for her. In all this, Janu is only vaguely aware of what she is at last taking her destiny into her own hands, Attempting to fight all that was the equivalent of trying to fight against fate, defeating their very purpose. Janu questions Goddess Mullakkalama:

What new sorrows awaited me, Mullakkalama? Hadn't I attempted to live a flawless life! Had I done anything that deserved such unending punishment? Why me? Why me? Why me? (AP 129)

Riya's schooling ends in disaster when she is expelled within a few weeks from school. Janu bitterly realizes there is no place for Riya in that horribly normal world back there, where children could paint purple mountains and sing the National Anthem.

Without any support or sympathy from Suresh and no system of education to speak for children with special needs in the town, Janu admits Riya to a school of sorts where an assortment of children of different ages and different stages of disability are sent. Janu asks herself about the miserable condition of her loveless life. And she finds the answer to the seemingly rhetorical question when she decides to get a BA degree in English Literature through distance education thus, unknowingly the slow process begins her evolving as a person. She also gradually frees herself from the oppressive burden of having to constantly live up to the impossibly high standards of the Maraars and the stigma of Riya's condition carries.

Janu soon offers to help the early intervention group at the short-staffed school, partly to keep an eye on Riya and to escape from the Maraars' caustic jibes, but also to equip herself better to deal with Riya's problem. This proves to be Janu's first tiny window to the world outside. As she starts researching for centers of treatment and training for Riya, Sheela Kuriakose who runs the school, sows the seed in Janu's heart, of the possibility of going abroad to do a course in special education, and taking Riya with her. The idea soon develops a life of its own as Janu dreams:

She could go to a wonderful Special School, the kind whose pictures I'd seen in American magazines, bursting with toys and special equipment. I'd do well in the course and then I'd be offered a job at the end of it. I'd work in Riya's Special School. We'd get ourselves an apartment....(AP 146)

Janu shares her thought of going to abroad for higher studies with her grand ma as:

I'm thinking of going to AMERICA with RIYA to do a COURSE. That's the only way I can show her to some SPECIALISTS there. Isn't that a GOOD idea, Ammumma?' (AP 159)

Misra projects Janu, a young lady who is yearning for true love but still brushes her desires aside and selflessly aims for the welfare of her disabled child. Therefore we can get a glimpse of it where Simone De Beauvoir Opines in her book *The Second Sex*(1983) that:

A generous mother who sincerely seeks her child's welfare, will, as a rule, think it is wiser to make a true woman of her since society will more readily to accept her if this is done. (TSS 445)

As Janu is deprived of marital love she is afraid of frank admission of her desires may disturb the delicate balance of her relationships. To survive emotionally she prefers to live in a make-believe world on her own. Through timidity, awkwardness or laziness she submits her decisions to her husband.

Here Janu can be compared with Jaya in the novel *That Long Silence* (1988) by Shashi Deshpande where Jaya too faces a tragic married life and teaches herself to wait in silence. She feels bewildered when she thinks about herself as she says, 'To know what you wantI have been denied thatEven now I don't know what I want'. (TLS 21)

As the conviction that education – for herself and for her child – is the only escape route for her and thus Janu is now prepared to fight her own battles and achieve her goals. When she gets her first letter of acceptance from the Arizona University in Phoenix, Arizona, with the condition that she would have to produce her MA certificate before joining, Janu begins to believe I had inched closer to my great escape! (AP 166) similarly, Anita Desai quoted in her novel *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) as:

Sometimes women play their roles not so much because they want to, as because they have to, in order to survive economically or psychologically and virtually all women engage in the feminine role-playing. (FOTM 59, 62)

Mentally disabled Riya thus becomes an agent of Janu's empowerment and escape. The transition from a sense of victimhood to an agency is slow and gradual. Janu, who once passively endured her lot, believing it to be a Karmic inevitability, is willing to pay the price, instead it being extracted from her by fate. But now, she expects to get something in return. After a long struggle, Janu gets a BA degree in English literature through distance education. On her struggle to give Riya special education. Sheela, the principal of that school sows a seed in Janu's heart of the possibility of going abroad to do a course in special education and taking Riya with her. Finally, on her way to Delhi for a scholarship interview which will fund her education in the USA, Janu muses:

I wasn't really clever, but I had achieved quite a lot merely through a combination of boredom and determination – a BA by the former and an M.A by the latter. (AP 170)

In Delhi, the city of her childhood and of her adolescent love, once again, the unseen hand of fate brings her face to face with Arjun. In all these years, the only link she has had with him is a vague awareness at the back of her mind about their different time zones. But now she walks into his arms and into adultery as if it is the most natural act. After facing the severe traditional marital rules for a decade, she breaks the first cardinal rule of marriage. But on her

return to Kerala, she is filled with grief and sorrows that she backstabbed and cheated her husband, Suresh.

The penalty she pays for an afternoon of bliss and peace is heavy. But now, she has a scholarship, an admission to a university in London for a diploma in Special Education and a chance at last for a modicum of happiness with Arjun, who, after all these years, still loves her deeply. It is Arjun who urges her to apply to a university in London so that they can be together. But even now, she believes that happiness is given, never taken, with careful calculations being made all the time.

Janu when she meets Arjun, forgets that she is a married woman and decides to opt for temporary happiness by staying with Arjun, knowing that nothing in life, especially happiness, is ever doled out free, and She seeks to end her marriage, for she and Suresh are Like prisoners who hated each other but were forced to serve endless sentences side by side. Here Janu can be compared to Indu in Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows* (1983) where the protagonist Indu says: It's a trap..... That's what marriage is. A trap? (RS 59)

As Janu is the silent sufferer of this trap she desires to release herself, therefore on her visit to Delhi the place of her happy childhood and beautiful adolescent she meets Arjun. Though she had not intended to meet Arjun, on her way for scholarship in an interview she meets Arjun by fate, after ten years of hardship and surrendering to rules and limitations, she finally breaks the first cardinal rule of marriage by staying with Arjun. Janu recollects Arjun's words:

But now Arjun was speaking to me again. 'Janu, you don't mind me being here, do you? When Leena said you were coming, I had to say and see how you were. I'll go, if you like...' (AP 187)

After ten years of tragic married life, along with sorrow and grief. Now Janu is offered with a scholarship and job in London. She has a chance for the specialization of studies in London. On her return to Vallapadu, Janu dares to tell the truth about Arjun, Janu says:

I told him about Arjun. That I had known him when I was still at school, that I would have liked to have married him one day, that my parents disapproved, that he had gone abroad and then I allowed my parents to arrange my marriage for me instead. I had not kept in touch with

him.....but I had met him again, in Delhi. He still loved me and was willing to marry me. I believed I still loved him too...With every word I uttered, I knew I was taking one more unreturnable step into the territory previously trodden only by very foolish or very bad women... (AP 219)

When she reveals this bitter truth to her husband, Suresh adopts silence and later on, he takes revenge on Janu by claiming that she is suffering mentally and admits her into the mental hospital. Janu says:

It's not madness, I am not mad, believe me...if I was, would I have been able to go to Delhi on my own... and get through a scholarship interview? I have it all there, in my room, in the drawer, their letters about the scholarship... (225)

Janu's Mother and Grandmother rescue her from the hospital and request a doctor:

Doctor, I want to take my daughter home today. I feel sure she will recover better if she is at home with her child. The child needs her too... (229)

Later on, Janu fights for divorce. She asks Suresh for divorce:

Suresh, I have to ask you...please, I don't want to hurt you...' I know 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 wants a divorce.' ...We're not happy together...we seem to need different things from life. (217)

So, the dream may or may not be fulfilled but one must make the effort and may achieve the desired success. Janaki's story can be compared to Adah's story in Emecheta's novel *In the Ditch*. Adah has a dream of going to England and becoming an intellectual elite. She marries Francis who shatters all her dreams. Like Janaki in the novel, Adah also cannot bear the inhuman nature of her husband and finally asks for the divorce. Both the protagonists redeem themselves

from the bondage of the unhappy and discontented marriage and enter into a new world of individuality and independence.

Anita Nair, author of the novel *Ladies Coupe* (2001) opines about inner strength of a woman: in an Interview with Bindu Menon:

There is a lot of strength in women that don't come out naturally, it has to be forced out of them, could him circumstances or a change in lifestyle. (Anita Nair)

But her daughter was taken back by Suresh. Determined to get Janu back he uses his daughter Riya as a weapon. This part of the narrative is probably a fairly common story of divorce among Indian and western couples alike. Therefore Life was impossible for Janu without her daughter Riya. But her consciousness refuses to commit suicide and forces her on a journey to fight, fight for self-discovery and self-satisfaction.

The life of Janu can be compared to Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1990) where the protagonist Jasmine as a contemporary woman with all her longings, aspirations, hope and frustrations never gives up. She refuses to commit suicide under adverse circumstances and makes a successful attempt to reshape her destiny and achieve happiness. Similarly, when Janu braves Suresh's wrath to tell him about Arjun, she knows she has, with one fell swoop, removed a terrible burden from her husband's shoulders and transferred it squarely on to her own.

Jealously and anger are reactions that Janu expects and is prepared for, even seeing them as qualifying factors in an otherwise weak person. But instead, her husband unleashes a complex plot of manipulation engineered by the Maraars. When they conspire to prove her insane and drug her into depression, she finds strength in two weak allies – her aging and frail grandmother and her defeated and fatalistic mother.

Janu believes that this is the severe punishment, fate has reserved for her for the ninety-eight days of happiness. She and Arjun part for the third time, without ever knowing if they will ever meet again, as she is still struggling to repay the debt she owes her daughter, who is now a hostage at the negotiating table of her future. She returns from London after experiencing a world where women take their right to be themselves for granted, as against women of her grandmother's generation, "who took what they were given with tolerance and fortitude", and for whom the concept of a better life is alien. As Misra portrays after breaking just about every rule in the Kerala Etiquette Handbook, Janu once again becomes grist for the gossip mill.

Soon it would have reason to sit back and rock on its heels in cruel laughter, slapping its friends on the back and wheezing with the fun of it all. (AP 237)

With her new-found awareness, Janu wonders why a state that boasts of the highest literacy rate in India, has not allowed the enlightenment and broadmindedness that education brings, to seep through the narrow and obdurate crevices of orthodoxy. She realizes that education lacking vision does not liberate the mind. But emboldened by Arjun's love, she finally fights the society's resistance to change and hopes that she has at last paid for a debt incurred many lifetimes ago. As the open-ended story 'ends' Janu knows that "tomorrow, the next chapter would begin.

JaishreeMisra is quite different from other women novelists in Indian English literature, she dares to make bold and bare statements. She does not color superficially or any extra sentimentalities. But instead, her characters are portrayed of truth felt and lived by them, nothing to do by any ideology. These components definitely single her from other writers. Thus, her response, her writing of life is devoid of any kind of over-ornamentation or intellectualizing. Her novels have bare hard truths more hard-hitting and more sensitive than anybody. *Ancient Promises* is often seen as an indictment of the system of arranged marriage. But this is to oversimplify the theme. Janu, tellingly remarks:

It wasn't the arranged-marriage system for sure. I had seen enough arranged marriages metamorphose into good marriages to know that. And I had seen enough men and women in England, with all the freedom to choose their own life-partners... (AP 299)

Admittedly, the author is critical of the way girls like Janu are unwittingly pushed into 'alliances' either because of social pressures or because their parents truly believe, like Janu's parents did, that they are doing what is best for their daughters. She is told that marriage would ensure that she would have more people to love and be loved by, Janu, therefore, enters her marriage in good faith, as is evident by her statement, (AP 37) But ironically, the promise of love is not kept, and she is forced to lead a lonely and loveless life. The point of suppressing feelings and how adversely it affects one's behavior eventually resulting in "conflict" is corroborated by eminent psychologists, Calvin S. Hall and Gardner Lindzey in their book *Theories of Personality* (1985):

The denial does not mean that the feelings cease to exist; they will still influence his behavior in various ways even though they are not conscious. A conflict will, then, exist between the interjected and spurious conscious values and the genuine unconscious ones. (TOP 289)

But despite this, when her marriage fails, Janu believes that even this has been preordained just as her marriage had been. She knows that marriages in Kerala involved whole clans, reaching back many ghostly generations. And once entered into, it was almost impossible to get out of. This leads us to the issue of patriarchal hegemony. If Janu's education is rudely cut short and she is pushed into an early marriage, while Arjun goes to England to educate himself, it is a manifestation of centuries of oppression coming into play even in the ultra-urban Delhi. But it is not only her father who is responsible for this high-handedness, but also her mother, and indeed, society as a whole. 'My mother had taken my happiness and converted it so easily into her pain'(AP 236) Janu bitterly muses, recalling the emotional blackmail, her mother uses to make her capitulate. Ironically, her mother is a school teacher in Delhi, not a helpless semi-literate small-town housewife, and her in-laws especially women folk who subject Janu to psychological cruelty, more than the men. Thus, the Maraar womenfolk by actively being abusive, and women in her own family by conditioning Janu into passively accepting her fate, perpetuate and perpetuate patriarchy.

All this proves the dictum – women beware women. Women are sometimes the worst enemies of women. Women also seem to endorse patriarchy as something desirable, as against Kerala's traditional matrilineal society. This leads one to wonder if Ancient Promises is a 'feminist' novel. 'Feminist Literature' is a value-loaded label and comes with its own baggage. But fortunately, Misra does not inflict this burden on her story. If at all Janu can be considered a 'feminist' heroine, it is only a by-product of her actions, and not central to her character. It is Arjun, with his enlightened views, who finally liberates Janu mentally. This is not to deny that Misra, through Janu's character, does acknowledge and articulate the efficacy of education as a tool of women's empowerment. No one she knows has had a divorce. Ostracised by the community, the three women – Janu, her widowed mother, and her aging grandmother – fight to survive not just the tragedy of Janu's failed marriage, but the claustrophobic pettiness of an orthodox society slowly closing in on them. Janu knows she has to bear the whispered label --a divorcee with a child. The women lean on each other for emotional sustenance and exhibit hidden reserves of inner strength and courage. If viewed from this prism, the novel does give a

courteous nod to feminism. Arundhati Roy in her major work *The God of small things* (1998) as a woman writer proclaims that.

Is there any taboo when it comes to women's marriage, it must be divorce. It is something that is unthinkable to any well-mannered women-there is virtually no good reason for a woman to leave her husband and file a divorce. Women who break such a taboo are never treated well by society and are condemned even by their families. A divorced woman has no position in her parents' home, this is a euphemistic way of expressing the common belief of people. (TGOS 45)

Janu, with the advantage of hindsight, realizes that it is only when she selflessly seeks to create a better life for Riya does a door open for her escape, reinforcing her belief that her child must have performed an act so utterly selfless for her in another life that she is ordained to pay the debt back in this one. The irony is not lost on Janu when she says: *Riya's disability had been the blessing to free me from that circle of forced happiness.* (AP:303) After longing for true love, for ten years she is still left wondering at the pointlessness of it all. But thanks her fate for allowing her desire to be fulfilled.

Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises* is her semi-autobiographical novel, it is the true life story of the author a, who must tell her tale which has been deeply experienced. She knows her territory well – her inner universe and the narrow world of Valapadu with its hypocrisies, stuck in the simulacrum of age-old values. She describes it vividly in a few deft strokes and fleshes out her characters with closely observed details. Janu's character is crafted with care. With a deep insight into her psyche, Misra makes her at once vulnerable and strong. The writer has a keen ear for conversation and uses this effectively and astutely to make the acid-tongued mother-in-law and her cronies come alive. Janu's mother and grandmother evolve from defeatist flag bearers of middle-class morality to unlikely champions of Janu's freedom, almost entirely bearing the brunt of the collective wrath of their neighbors. It is not easy to depict a weak character like Suresh, but Misra creates a realistic portrayal of him. Arjun, with his brief appearance, could have easily degenerated into someone wishy-washy, but it is to Misra's credit that he is not an un-dimensional character. Though Maraars used Riya to bring back Janu, they failed and at last, the battle was won by Janu and they gave back Riya to her. Arjun accepts Riya and Janu and they three lived happily ever after. As Janu says:

I married my Arjun eventually and Riya happily lived with us... I hope I remember always to be grateful that I had another chance to build that tower in the sky. (AP 308)

Janu's attempts at self-fulfillment are thwarted at every step of the way until she almost gives up. Janu questions her fate that if Suresh was whom she was meant to marry, why she and Arjun were made to fall so deeply in love so early in life, she wonders. And if she and Arjun were promised to each other by fate and were, therefore, given a second chance to reclaim each other, why she was forced to face the emotional turmoil of longing for true love. In this novel, the author shows the transformation of the character from an eighteen-year-old witless young bride, to a stronger, warmer, more determined Janu. It takes courage to continue studying and secretly planning and plotting whilst living in a larger household.

Misra's successful novel *Ancient Promises* (2000) published by Penguin Books which received critical and popular acclaim, works at several levels. At one level, it delineates the inexorability and inevitability with which providence plays a complex game using human pawns. At another, it is a triumph of individual will – of not resigning oneself to one's fate but to quench the thirst of true. Misra believes that like Janu, one can try to make fate seed some ground. But she reminds the reader that Janu has not come out unscathed from the battle between two unequal forces – fate and human will. Janu's struggle is a long and exhausting one but she was patiently longing for true love. This makes her and her story more convincing. Misra deploys certain realistic ramifications into the theme i.e. longing for true love, which prevents *Ancient Promises* from degenerating into a facile motivational, book about realizing one's potential against all odds.

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