

Subverting the Stereotypes: A Reading of Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises*

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Abstract: *The Indian goddess Sita is regarded by many as the epitome of womanly virtues, thanks to the dominant male discourses that have popularized the Sita myth and constructed female subjectivity in order to pin down woman to the 'pathivrata' image of the so-called ideal woman. In this paper I argue that Jaishree Misra's novel **Ancient Promises** is a classic example of a feminist operation subverting the Sita myth. Here I analyze the fictional narrative of Misra, first by problematizing the gender-specific issues evident in this text, and then by examining how these issues have a bearing upon the concepts of love and sex in the space of conjugality vis-à-vis Indian women. I also examine how Misra exploits the discursive space inherent in her woman-centric writings and converts fiction into a socio-literary discourse, displaying a continuous interplay of gender and culture, and standing witness to the emergence of a brave new woman who defies hegemonic dispensation and patriarchal indoctrination.*

Keywords: *Ancient Promises, female subjectivity, ideal woman, Jaishree Misra, male discourses, new woman, Sita.*

In this paper I argue that Jaishree Misra's novel *Ancient Promises* (2000) is a classic example of a feminist operation subverting the Sita myth. The Indian goddess Sita, who chose to incarnate herself on the Earth to provide mankind with paradigmatic role model, is regarded by many Indians as the epitome of womanly virtues: modesty, chastity, endurance, obedience, and self-sacrifice. Dominant male discourses have popularized this Sita myth and constructed female subjectivity in order to pin down woman to the 'pathivrata' (dutiful and faithful wife; chaste woman) image of the so-called ideal woman, and thus to control her speech, restrict her movement, and finally to reduce her identity to the subaltern status of the 'other.' Here I analyze the fictional narrative of Misra first by problematizing the gender-specific issues evident in this text, and then by examining how these issues have a bearing upon the concepts of love and sex in the space of conjugality. I also examine how Misra exploits the discursive space inherent in her women-centric writings and converts fiction into a socio-literary discourse, displaying a continuous interplay of gender and culture, and standing witness to the emergence of a brave new woman who defies hegemonic dispensation and patriarchal indoctrination.

Years of impositions on feminine virtues have compelled Indian women to internalize the importance of being a 'pathivrata' even to the point of self-effacement and total enslavement to the power of the phallus. Religion and culture create a 'feminine mystique' of woman, as Betty Friedan puts it, and any attempt to dismantle this ideal image is met with stiff resistance from the self-proclaimed culture-guardians and moral police. Patriarchy has laid emphasis, either through overt statements or metaphorical illustrations, on the importance of female modesty, chastity and submissiveness for a healthy man-woman relationship. Prem Chowdhry rightly observes: "One of the dominant images of woman that has survived through history is that of the chaste woman/wife. . . . It continues to gain popularity, particularly in popular cultural forms, which project this image as quintessentially that of an Indian woman and as an intrinsic part of Indian culture" (110-111). The importance attributed to masculine power in *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* envisages a moral code endorsing woman's subordinate status. Lord Rama tells his mother: "A woman attains the highest heaven merely by serving her husband. . . . With her only interest the welfare of her husband, a woman should constantly serve him—this has been the dharma of women from ancient times, this is what the Vedas and the Smritis say" (qtd. in Chaitanya 180). Similarly, Manu instructs women: "Whether a drunkard, leper, sadist or wife-beater, a husband is to be worshipped as god" (qtd. in Seshadri 31). Brainwashed by such propaganda, woman internalizes the idea that playing the roles of a modest wife and a devoted mother entitles her to public adulation. In short, the wife-mother images exert profound influence on the identity of a woman, so much so that her success or failure in life gets directly linked to her success or failure in marital life.

Jaishree Misra's novel *Ancient Promises* is set in the contemporary socio-cultural milieu of Kerala. As the title tells us, the novel is based on some ancient codes and directives regarding conjugal life, violating which is supposed to bring about ruin upon the offenders. In other words, the text foregrounds the question of sanctity of the institution of marriage. As Lata Mishra points out, the novel exposes the patriarchal notion that marriage

is a matter that concerns not just two persons but the society as a whole (141). The central character of the novel, Janu, gives up her adolescent sweetheart Arjun, and on compulsions from her parents enters an arranged marriage with another man named Suresh Maraar. It turns out to be a mundane, meaningless marital bond for Janu with an indifferent husband, a hostile family, and a daughter having severe learning disabilities. Her unexpected meeting with Arjun in Delhi rekindles their love for each other, and it eventually leads to her leaving Suresh and joining Arjun in England. The novel opens with the news of her divorce with Suresh—"My marriage ended today" (3)—and ends with a positive authorial note: "Tomorrow, the next chapter would begin" (305).

Marriage seems to be an obsessive topic with Misra. *Ancient Promises* tells us how marriage becomes a potent weapon in the hands of man in controlling and subjugating woman. Patriarchy encourages women to envisage marriage as sacrosanct and obligatory—the apotheosis of a woman's destiny. Girls get trained in the family so that they may prepare themselves to safely enter matrimony, their absolute truth, and remain there successfully. Those who opt to stay out are often deemed as daring deviants because "All girls have to get married someday" (66). The institutional structure of marriage with its hierarchical order often imposes strictures on women and any female activism is immediately interpreted as defiance. Moreover, as Asma Shamail points out, "The Indian system of arranged marriage institutionalizes the lack of fulfilment of feminine desire whereby women become tokens of exchange within the patriarchal economy that reinforces male guardianship of women" (65).

The very name of Misra's heroine—Janu—makes her identity problematic. Janu bears the name of the mythical Janaki, a synonym for Sita. Misra, by naming her heroine 'Janu,' undertakes to subvert the stereotypical Sita image thrust upon Indian women. That the mythical Janaki (Sita) had the freedom to choose her husband by 'swayamvaram' (a form of marriage in which a girl chooses her husband of her own free will from among a number of suitors), whereas Misra's Janaki was forced to enter an arranged marriage sounds ironical. An examination into the circumstances that made Janu conform to the traditional system of marriage at the cost of losing her soulmate can tell us how patriarchal indoctrination and cultural conditioning corrupt the objectivity of even educated women. Janu vainly puts forward some weak arguments against getting married. However, she is not bold enough to tell them the truth that she loves someone else. The reason is not far to seek—Janu was born and brought up in a familial environment that compelled women to internalize feminine virtues of obedience and modesty, and naturally she would find it extremely difficult to declare her love or say 'no' to the marriage proposal because that would damage the good name of her family. "The emphasis on family honour is a subtle patriarchal strategy to enslave women to a fixed code in which maintenance of the honour becomes the supreme goal," observes Anuradha Roy (119). Janu also must have kept in mind her mother's words: "The reputations of families were carried on the shoulders of their daughters" (46-47). Though Janu said that she was tired of fighting off her family (63) the real fight was between her sense of filial obligations and amorous inclinations; between the traditional culture of conformity and the modern concept of liberation; between acquiescence and defiance. And Janu, for the time being, chose to be an obedient child of conformity.

The very wedding ceremony teaches Janu what a submissive role she is expected to play once she becomes a wife: she is supposed to follow her husband's footsteps, obey him in all matters, and always be his shadow and nothing more. Janu says: "While walking around the flickering vilakku [lamp] at the temple with my head bowed, I'd plenty of time to observe his feet as he walked ahead of me. I'd felt a sudden lurching realization that I was getting more time to familiarize myself with the feet of the man I was marrying than his face!" (84). Once Janu arrives at the Maraar house as a wife, she is greeted with many 'dos' and 'don'ts': she is supposed to speak only very little because 'brides were expected to be bashful' (86). Thus she learns her first lesson: taciturnity is a better virtue for a wife than verbosity. She tries her best to fit herself well into the image of an 'ideal' wife. Since the Maraar family has already straitjacketed her into the slot of a feminine ideal, it is easy for them to assign her the responsibility of childcare and mothering. The married life of Janu and Suresh soon becomes a matter of habit and ritual marked by monotony and boredom. As Bishwanath Ghosh says, "Marriage doesn't come with a warranty card: it is a commodity you buy purely on trust, like you buy a book" (8). Janu and Suresh were operating in two opposite realms—of dominance and subordination, of the ideal and the actual. Suresh, a dominant and privileged husband carrying a patriarchal baggage, can see his wife only as a homemaker, a possession, and his private property, and so, he systematically controls her mobility, sexuality, and identity. Janu is told when she can leave the house, where she can go, and for how long. In short, she is forced to remain in the cultural space of the family under an ever watchful invisible eye of the patriarchal panopticon. She is always surrounded by people, yet she feels lonely, desperate to express herself but destined to suppress her voice. Silence and invisibility, supposedly virtuous attributes of an ideal Indian wife, thus become the qualities of Janu too. She is thus reduced to a docile, dependent subaltern, unable to speak.

Misra's Sita—Janu—does not remain silent and invisible forever. There comes a time when self-effacement gives way to self-assertion. Janu's transformation from the state of silence to speech can be better understood if we examine the treatment of the theme of sexuality in the novel. Though sexuality is not assigned centrality in the text, it is treated as a crucial component. In patriarchal terms, a woman's body is nothing but a commodity for appropriation by man. Viewing her only as a body is tantamount to defining her identity in terms

of her unchanging essentialism. The sexual relationship between Janu and her husband was centred on such essentialist and gendered ideologies. In their union there was no exchange of words, no love, and no fun. "It felt awkward to be kissed by a mouth that had not had very much to say to me up to that point," says Janu (87; emphasis in orig.). She suffered it because she could not help it. Chandra Nisha Singh points out: "Compulsory sexual rights which marriage permits to a man over a woman's body damage feminine sensibility irreparably and cause psychological fragmentation" (108). Patriarchy endorses male sexual dominance over woman, but deems female sexual activism as destructive. It advocates restraint on the female body, often in the guise of religious or moral teachings, which either strategically deify women or directly impose taboos on them. Anuradha Roy observes: "A natural expression of woman's sexual nature . . . is summarily branded as immoral, for female sexuality is traditionally centred round the function of reproduction" (44). Such stringent strictures on female sexuality somehow convey the idea that sex, after all, is dirty and dangerous, capable of corrupting the moral fabric of society, and that it gains sanctity only if performed within wedlock. Misra presents the affair between Janu and her lover Arjun as a vehement critique on such assumptions regarding female sexuality. Janu-Arjun relationship is a mutually enriching union of minds and bodies, a purifying act that absolves them of their gender restrictions. Though Arjun was now out of sight and Janu became the wife of someone else, she could never erase him out of her mind. She wished, many a time, to leave her marriage and rejoin Arjun: "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" (121). She admits to her friend Leena: "I loved him [Arjun] once and I never loved another and, girlishly foolishly stupidly [sic], I still thought of him everyday. Everyday. For about nine goddamned years (186). An 'ideal' wife is expected to devote herself completely, body and soul, thoughts and deeds, to none but her husband. That Janu, a wife and mother, was thinking of her teenage lover, not once in a while, but every single day of her marriage, is, in patriarchal terms, a sacrilegious act of transgression. But Janu is willing to transgress, because she believes that to save herself from the marital entrapment, she must, first of all, erase the sacrosanct ideas of feminine virtues from her psyche. She thus breaks the wall of silence and proves that the subaltern also can speak.

By making Janu and Arjun meet in a passionate sexual encounter outside wedlock, Misra problematizes the very concept of conjugal purity. She minces no words in telling us how passionately these two lovers got merged into each other: "Our bodies fused effortlessly together, sunshine on sand, the rain on the sea . . . it was hard to tell where one ended and the other began" (190). There was no power play operating between them, no recital of 'ancient promises,' but only love, desire, and respect for each other. Misra purposely makes her heroine more active in the sexual encounter. We read: "I [Janu] pulled him down again and laid my body over his, holding him as tightly as I could to cancel out the years of pain. . . . I used my fingers to hold his head captive as I brought my face down to cover his face with kisses" (195-196). Once a modest Sita, who would not even voice her sentiments on love, let alone sex, Janu now frankly expresses her feelings of erotic bliss without fear or shame: "If I had known such sweetness and bliss, would I have ever been able to give it up?" (196). Janu here defies the moral codes on feminine modesty and shatters the myth of female sexual passivity. Her bold articulations are actually code-breaking declarations: she tells the world that woman cannot be imprisoned within 'ancient promises' for ever—she would resist such impositions even if it meant demolishing the holy idols and dismantling an age-old value system.

Janu regains her identity the moment she decides to quit the marital entrapment. The Janu who returns to Kerala after the Delhi episode is a new woman. She is now confident and assertive and no longer experiences any dilemma. She tells her family about what happened in Delhi: "That I'd met him again, and loved him again" (213). We also hear a bold Janu speaking to her husband with absolute clarity: "Suresh I want a divorce" (217). Angry and worried over the possible stigma of a divorce, Suresh issues a threat: "My influence can even extend to England, you know" (244). And here we see a new Janu—not the docile and submissive wife, but a daring, defiant woman shouting at her husband, "Get out." Suresh tries his best to crush her spirit: he calls her a prostitute; he gets her into a mental hospital; he takes their daughter away from her. But by this time Janu had grown too strong to be defeated by male power. She trusts herself and fights to the last. Finally Suresh gives up—he agrees for a divorce and promises to give back their daughter to Janu.

The heterogeneous experiences Janu is made to undergo bespeak the predicament of many Indian women placed in the domestic environment. Misra shows us how a docile and conformist Sita transforms herself to a daring and nonconformist new woman who questions the sanctity of wedlock and declares her sexual freedom. Janu actually begins her narration at the ending: "My marriage ended today" (3). And to comfort her sad mother Janu said, ". . . endings were really only beginnings in disguise" (3). She was true—it all signalled the ending of an old set of codes and the beginning of a new one; the death of old Janaki and the birth of a new Janu. And Misra, by validating his Sita's crossing the 'Lakshmanarekha' (a line or limit that should not be transgressed), subverts the Sita myth, undermines the clichés on quintessential female virtues, and dismantles the institutional vocabularies on love and sex.

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