

**CULTURE RE-CONTEXTUALIZED: A STUDY OF JAISHREE MISHRA'S  
ANCIENT PROMISES**

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Jaishree Mishra, a revolutionary writer in her debut novel *Ancinet Promises* tries to break down the cultural abstractions of Indian women. She has seven novels to her credit followed by *Ancient Promises*. It is a prescribed text in several universities and colleges for B.A. English literature Courses. She has also edited an anthology of writings on the subject of motherhood as a fund-raising project for Save the Children India which was published by the Feminist publishing house Zubaan in 2012. *A House for Mr. Misra* is her first work of non-fiction

*“Ancient Promises* is the story of Janaki (Janu) a strong willed but, dutiful woman who dare to challenge the set norms to find the true happiness in a rightful manner. She is a Malayali Nair girl born and brought up at Delhi, where she feels at home than at her ancestral land. The Western lifestyle for freedom gets rooted in her mind during her school days. Janu's life takes a new turn at the age of 16, when she meets Arjun, the local school cricketing hero. Their friendship slowly blooms into romance and eventually takes a worst turn when Janu's parents get rid of her romantic escapades. Arjun leaves for England for his higher studies and their romance comes to an end.”

Janu's parents take her to Kerala. Like other teenage girl, Janu feels unsure of her future with Arjun. Janu enters a different world of lifestyle at Kerala. The wings of her carefree life gets crippled as she agrees to marry according to her parents' wishes. She gets married to Suresh from the socially respected Maraar family on her eighteenth birthday. Love and affection become a distant desire for Janu as she enters the typical, traditional matriarchal *Maraar* household. In one her interviews Misra says, in *Ancient Promises* it is 'Literacy without Liberation ' The Maraar family detests the Delhi background of Janu and encourage Suresh to be aloof or uncaring to her feelings. Years pass by and Janu expects that a birth of the child, will bring a change in everyone's life. Her sole hope for happiness gets punched when, she gives birth a mentally challenged baby girl, Riya. She is very much determined to secure a place for herself and Riya. As a result Janu pursues her education and raises Riya without getting any help from her family members. Taking things in her hands, she applies to study abroad and leaves for Delhi to attend a scholarship interview.

Janu decides to visit her old schoolmate Leena during the gap between the interview and the results. There she meets the much loved person Arjun unexpectedly. Arjun's passions arise and the couple realize that they still feel deeply for each other. Janu plans to leave her unhappy life behind and to take Riya along with them. But, her in-laws play tricks and Janu leaves for England without her daughter, Riya. Arjun and Janu relive their loving moments in London which they long for. However, they realize that their life will be incomplete without Riya. Janu comes back to India, promising a soon return along with her daughter. Suresh reconciles himself to a divorce, hands over Riya.

The novel begins where Janu's marital life comes to an end in the form of divorce. Her mother is very much upset and regrets about her daughter's future. But it is too late to regret. Janu's life at Delhi is the happiest one. And her school days with her friends especially with Leena and Arjun are memorable. At the age of sixteen, she is committed to Arjun. Their affair continues when she went for her vacation to Kerala. She asked Arjun to write letters to her in the name of girl. After her return to Delhi, she is caught by her father and is treated rudely for her love affair. She is warned not to use telephone – the mode of communication. It hurts Janu a lot. She is instructed to strictly give up her thought of continuing her higher studies before marriage and obey their words in getting married to Mr.Suresh, the proposal brought by her grandmother.

In blind, raging confusion that this little girl had become a woman without anyone bothering to tell him. ... All the anger ... at having ever left Kerala, at having carefully attempted to bring up a daughter in a thankless place like Delhi, at having been deceived by the thing he most loved in the world ... all seemed to be coming out at me, with that horribly swishing cane. (Ancient Promise, 48)

In this circumstance, her parents instead of restricting her to regulate, they should have given counseling about marriage and life to Janu.

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, would have been the sssstirring in his heart when his mother had shown him the picture of fresh-faced girl she'd chosen for him to marry eighteen years ago. This running-round-trees business was for film stars and fools, he often said. (pp.23-24)

Janu is in dilemma to decide about her marriage. Arjun is in England to pursue his higher studies at Hull University in London. He asked Janu to wait till he completes the course. But it is a very long period in Janu's calendar to wait for five long years. So Janu tries to postpone the marriage. She deliberately fails and says 'yes' to her marriage. Here, she commits the mistake. As an adult and an educated modern young girl, she should have stood very firm grip in her concept of love.

In the words of Janu,

My world was a confusing one for them. They were so sure that I would be safest among my own people, marrying eventually into my own community. He couldn't age (too young, wrong community(not Malayali) , I was too young. (p.26)

She thinks she couldn't withstand the situation and face the hardships .At last she succumbs to the situation. This reveals that her love to Arjun has declined. Belief and faith are the key factors of love. But Janu lacks gradually the belief in her love. Janu is married to Suresh. She suffers from the pangs of separation. Sanjay Kumar remarks,

Catapulted into accepting Suresh as her husband before being able to 'know' him, Janu's cosmopolitan existence seems to be imperiled while treading a path outlined by conventionalities and orthodoxies. Knowing herself getting married to a 'stranger,' she finds it difficult to share her bed with someone whom she has hardly known.

Janu's perception of love differs from that of her parents.

"You couldn't pull the covering sheets in bed from a complete stranger, could you? How had Ma and Dad done it? They'd barely known each other when they'd got married too. At what point did they decide they'd been married long enough to pull sheet away from each other in night?"<sup>21</sup>

The protagonist's consciousness is prone to question the obvious, granted and given. Her life at her in-law's hometown becomes a turbulent one. She is torn constantly between the cultures of New Delhi and Kerala, first the culture of her parents and subsequently her in-laws' seem to entrust on her.

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Janu is capable of revealing her maturity when she drafts a letter to Arjun about her impending wedding. Her rational thinking and filial love is exposed through her letter.

“... I’m tired of fighting off my family, they’ve proven their love for me in the eighteen years it’s taken to bring me up. And I just can’t believe they’d push me into something that would be wrong for me. I know you think of it as a stupidly blind kind of trust, but there it is. (Ancient Promises, p. 63)

She finds it very difficult to retain her individuality in the Marrayar family. Just like any other conservative family, Janu’s in-laws’ expects her to surrender herself on the altar of the society. Terribly alienated in a world of an escaping husband and snobbish mother-in-law, Janu tries to slip into accepting feminine obligations. She begins to imagine herself to breathe a new life from a doubtful existence to the forefront of recognition by coming out in flying colours of her motherhood.

Jaishree optimistically begins to romanticize Janu’s glory as a proud mother and fulfilling daughter-in-law:

Perhaps, just perhaps, having a child would solve my problems more easily than a BA and a job. That’s what I’d do. I’d have a child! She, as their grandchild, would be loved. Especially if she turned out to be the much-longed-for first grandson. And, as his mother, I’d receive a sort of instant doublepromotion, so to speak. Be elevated to the position of Good Mother and Good Daughter-in-Law. And spin out the rest of my days basking in a kind of reflected glory and blissful motherhood. (Ancient Promises, 113)

She thinks that the child would bridge the gap between her and the new family. But this also becomes futile. She delivers a baby girl. It is a great shock to her when the child is declared a ‘mentally challenged.’ Her condition becomes more pathetic and powerless. She spends most of her time with the disabled child and takes care of her well. She decides to admit her in St. Thomas Nursery but Ria is sent out. Later she is admitted in a school for differently abled children. Janu decides to take a special course to teach the differently abled group of children. She applies for this course in USA and is she is asked to qualify for it. She completes her M.A., then she is asked to appear for an interview in New Delhi to avail scholarship for doing the course. She faces the situation in a very courageous manner. She is highly optimistic and her attitude has to be appreciated. “I grabbed at the realization with a weary but dizzy, almost overwhelming sense of liberation . I was free. I neither had to struggle for their approval anymore, nor put Riya through the same hopeless loop.” Janu says, surprised at her own triumph, “I wasn’t sure why I had so easily given up my own right to be loved.” (132)

The events that unfold make her to get rid of the oppressive patriarchal society and emerges as a new empowered women who can surf all the hurdles in her life. Arjun asks her to get divorce and bring Riya from her husband. It is he who asks Janu to do the course in London. In turn, it is also accepted by the Board. After completing her course in London staying alongwith Arjun, she thinks she needs Riya. Her deep attachment with the baby forms the best protection and also a salvation. She visualizes herself that she is able to relieve herself from the clutches of the perpetual periphery. Janu begins to feel the fragrance of freedom striking her, emboldening her and eventually empowering her.

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