



PATRIARCHAL CULTURAL SUPREMACY AND SOCIO-CULTURAL OBLIGATIONS ON MARITAL SPACE OF WOMEN IN JAISHREE MISRA'S *ANCIENT PROMISES*

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Abstract

The present research attempts to examine the study of women's subaltern status in the parochial society and their constant struggle in their living spaces to achieve place and space in production spaces. Jaishree Misra is one of the contemporary Indian female novelists who is widely acclaimed not only in India but also in the world for her fictional narratives. She emerges on the literary horizon among the modern women novelists and focuses on the spatial contemporary issues such as feminine sensibilities, feminine spaces, female psyche, women's subordination, subjugation, marginalization, identity, gender issues, cultural conflict, alienation, the complexities of human relationships, social intricacies and inhibitions, cruelty and violence towards the marital issues, the problem of rehabilitation after divorce and place-space paradigm, are the major themes of her writing. She uses the socio-cultural and spatial geographical settings to provide her female protagonists more space-more physical space, psychological space, cultural space, social space, familial space, and a better platform to move out and ahead to live, and to think freely in their spatial world. Also, the paper focuses on the oppressive patriarchal spaces and culture of Kerala where women are exploited, suppressed, subjugated, and subordinated in various stages and are disallowed to occupy their spaces. Further, the researcher brings to light as how a female subjects of Jaishree Misra attempt to find spaces for themselves in the act of their revolt against the spatial fixities compelled by the socio-cultural cryptograph of parochial normative hegemonies.

Key Words: *feminine sensibilities, feminine spaces, female psyche, women's subordination, subjugation, marginalization, identity, gender issues, cultural conflict*

INTRODUCTION

Ancient Promises (2000) is a debut, semi-autobiographical novel that depicts the life story of the author herself. It is a story of an unsuccessful marital life that leads to the spatial painful journey of the protagonist, Janu who struggles to acquire several spaces while moving into different geographical locations. Jaishree Misra showcases the complexities of age-old customs and traditions that cause female subjugation, oppression, suppression, marginalization, gender, identities, and the deplorable voiceless condition of women in typical orthodox Indian society. She depicts the condition of economically independent women characters in society but they do not have proper space to control over their life as their lives are controlled by others. This is the best example of postcolonial spaces as they live in their spaces that are encountered in their self and other, center and periphery axis. Though they are educated and financially sound and independent in their comfort zones, they act as pupates as their lives are controlled by others.

The story of the novel revolves around the Malayalam girl, Janu who is sincere, educated, intellectual, and determined young girl. Also, the writer throws light upon Janu's spatial journey towards self-realization and self-actualization in the traditional and cultural society. It is a fascinating story of her longish spatial journey begins with the reminiscences of exultant childhood moments to miserable adulthood and ends with an unhappy marriage. The story of the novel often travels between two different geographical places-Delhi and Kerala. These variant geographical locations influence the lives of Janu and other characters in the novel. The writer focuses on Janu's traditional space, her space of conservative upbringing, her space of teenage love, her emotional space, and her space of arranged marriage to a person from Kerala. Janu grows up in a very traditional and conservative Malayalam family that is exceedingly conventional and aristocratic. But Janu is vastly influenced by the western culture and lifestyle that gets deeply rooted in her inner space right from her childhood. Janu constantly visits Kerala, her natal space, to meet her grandparents as usual in the vacation. Once, she comes to know that her grandmother arranges a marriage proposal for her at the age of eighteen.

Janu's parents belong to a middle-class family and strictly believe in age-old traditions and conservative beliefs of society in their natal place. Janu is forced to marry a man who is unknown to her, as part of the social institution of arranged marriage, she is supposed to accept the proposal that is brought by her typical conservative parents. They want their daughter, Janu to have a traditional arranged marriage according to the culture and tradition of Kerala. But they are unaware of the aftermaths of arranging marriages in Indian society. Generally, the tradition of arranged marriage, in India, becomes a burden on the lives of the female gender and creates many conflicts while living in a patriarchal society. Asma Shamail rightly observes,

“The Indian system of arranged marriage institutionalizes the lack of fulfillment of feminine desire whereby women become tokens of exchange within the patriarchal economy that reinforces male guardianship of women.” (Asma Shamail 65)

Janu, being a part of the new generation, prefers to live in a modern space and grows up with modern thoughts and principles which is completely against her parents' wish. Janu's father, being orthodox, is totally against the concept of love. He follows all the conservative beliefs as he lives in a space of conventional society where social space and values are given more importance rather than the feeling and emotions of an ordinary human being. He does not like, the young girls and boys falling in love before their marriage. Janu's parents believe and try to stick to the old customs and traditions. They try to maintain a cultural space and conventional life and make a fixed spatial thought that children must settle themselves in their life with their parental choice and blessings. Janu's parents never tolerate the fact that their daughter finds a life partner for herself of her own choice. This is quite unimaginable for them and does not match their tradition and culture-oriented thoughts. But, when her parents come to know about her love affair with Arjun, they suddenly shift her to their natal space, Kerala, and arrange her marriage with a fellow Keralite, Suresh Marrar who is from the rich, aristocratic, and well-established Keralite family.

Janu sacrifices her personal space and accepts the proposal against her wish for the sake of her family's happiness and social status. Her arranged marriage with Suresh fulfills the wish of her parents as they struggle to maintain the family honour in social and public space. Her marriage explores the importance of traditions and rituals in familial space and family's social reputation than the space and desire of the bride and the groom. Janu, after her marriage, assimilates successfully and mixes herself into the Maraar family but her presence in the space of the Marrar family provokes disorder in her personal and private space because she does not assimilate with the culture of the Maraar family. Janu's marriage with Suresh is an act of removing Janu from her comfort arena to the public space of parochial supremacy. Also, her marriage represents an endorsement of her family's spatial Keralite identity.

The tradition of arrange marriages create the stormiest environment in the lives of the young generation. It occurs because of the changing nature of culture and traditional beliefs among the orthodox people and their conservative space. Traditional and conservative upbringings make people doubtful about their identities, spaces, and belongingness. In case of Janu, her parents are from the orthodox family of Kerala who represent staunch beliefs in religion, culture, cast, language and ethnicity. Even after the gap of nearly thirty years they fail to free themselves from their native culture. In the postmodern era of technological upgradation, Janu fails to convince them and they also fail to understand the space of life and modernization. This disappoints her, as a result she succumbs to will of her parents to accept arranged marriage within her cast and cultural, ethnic, and regional spatial limits. The

orthodox and age-old beliefs of her family do not permit her to pursue higher studies. It shows how such conservative beliefs bring the restrictions on female mobility in terms of both space and their identity and eventually become a case of their subordination.

Janu struggles in her feminine space to get the place in the mind of the new family and for their consideration as a member of family. She is instructed and conditioned to adjust to new family by both parents and in-laws. After marriage, she changes her priorities and creates spatial interest in learning cooking and pleasing the in-laws in familial space. She accepts everything that comes in her way to maintain psychological, physical, emotional, and cultural spaces that keep her meek, obedient, invisible, and silent in the Maraar household. Her unsympathetic husband, Suresh, is too busy to notice the struggle she undergoes to adjust herself to the space of customs and traditions of the family. She sacrifices her own space of happiness and accepts the proposal because she does not want to bring any disgrace and dishonour to her family and also to maintain the familial, social, and cultural space. She sacrifices her love for Arjun and decides to obey the decision of her parents. In this act Janu vacates her living space for the public space by obeying her parents who represent customs, traditions, cast, religion and native regional entities. Anuradha Roy rightly observes,

“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.” (Anuradha Roy 119)

It shows how traditional, cultural, social cryptographs and patriarchal dominance collapse the intelligence and independence of educated women and their personal spaces. Janu’s acceptance of the marriage proposal exposes that she is born and brought up in such a familial space that is completely against the wishes and expectations of the new generation. Janu occupies the feminine spaces and also the spaces of humbleness, agreement, and modesty to protect the cultural and social space of her family. There is a clash between spatial traditional values and the modern concept of freedom that reflects through Janu’s character. Though she is a modern girl, in her space of modern values, she becomes an obedient daughter when she decides not to go against her parents.

Janu, after marrying off Suresh Maraar, struggles to occupy the familial, cultural, and domestic spaces of the Maraar household. She tries to adapt and assimilate the traditions and customs of the Maraar family. She understands her position and space when she enters Maraar family as a daughter-in-law. The expectations of the Maraar family are totally against Janu’s wish and her personal space. They strictly instruct her to behave in a Maraar way and also make a compulsion to dress only in the Maraar way. They disallow her to occupy both personal and private spaces and shift her into a more confined space. The conflict between the space of clothing and the space of identity are recurrent themes in the novel. In Maraar family, wearing certain combinations of clothes gives Janu a sense of spatial Maraar identity. They never allow her to enter their familial space and remain force her to follow the Maraar

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culture and tradition. Further, dressing in a Maraar way creates a complex situation in Janu's inner space because she looks and dresses like a typical Maraar woman instead of dressing in such a manner that represents her self-identity and space. The clothes Janu wears are symbolic of different stages of her life in a spatial form and it gives the sense of belonging to a particular social group.

Janu and Suresh occupy two opposite spaces in their marital relationship and completely fail to maintain their conjugal space. In patriarchal space, Suresh dominates and forces Janu to live in a subordinate space. He dominates and interferes in her personal and private space and considers her as a homemaker, an option, a possession, a subordinate object, and his private property. He uses his masculine space systematically to control her mobility, sexuality, identity, and space. Suresh avoids Janu for making love to her as a wife and pays little attention to her. He spends more time with his father, discussing business at the time of breakfast and lunch but denies sharing his business views with Janu. He prohibits Janu to enter his personal and business spaces. Suresh's dominance and his living away from her create confusion in her inner space. She expresses her views about their conjugal relationship,

"It was getting clearer that it was the Maraars I had married, not Suresh. He had not been unkind, but had not seemed to want to spend much time alone with me" (Misra 87).

This instance exclaims how Suresh has no living space or personal space. The public space of business and family reputation have encroached personal and living spaces of Suresh.

Suresh never shows any sign of love and sympathy to her in their marital life. Janu is conditioned and confined for many limitations like-when she can leave the house, where she can go, to whom she can meet, how much time she can keep herself out of the home, and the like. Suresh keeps her in his house like a maid who is not supposed to work and even move into a house without his permission. He denies her space of freedom and individuality in her own in-law's home. Janu feels like a captive in her familial space that she cannot occupy in her house as a housewife. She sacrifices her all wishes, interests, hobbies, habits, her personal and private spaces only because of her husband's tyrannical and domineering nature. Her living in a modern way in the Maraar family is against the Maraar tradition and culture. The conversation suggests her restrictions in Maraar family:

I decide to take the plunge. Boldly, I replied, 'Yes, please'. 'Look, you're not in Delhi any more. Like it or not, you live in Kerala, so I suggest you drop all these fashionable Pleases and Thank Yous. Here we don't believe in unnecessary styles. (Misra 80)

Jaishree Misra depicts Janu as a silent sufferer in the Maraar family because she gets a secondary place and subordinate space in this family and even in society. She is supposed to

carry all the spatial burdens of the family. She is enslaved by her husband, Suresh for the sake of completing all the domestic duties. As per the tradition and culture of the Maraar family, women are kept away from occupying their personal and private spaces. Janu comes to know, soon after marriage, that Suresh instructs four things to his parents to choose his wife with qualities like she must be pretty, young, adjustable, and shall be able to speak English fluently, it may help him to improve his business. Thus, Jaishree Misra attacks the institution of marriage and the patriarchal cultural supremacy that objectifies woman by turning marriage into an agreement or a market. Janu gets anxious when she comes to know that she is not her family's first choice as an ideal daughter-in-law rather she is chosen on the criteria of Suresh's specification of qualities of an ideal wife with his conditions.

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