



Exigency Verses Empowerment in Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises*

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Manuscript ID:

BIJ-SPL5-MAR26-MD-023

Subject: *English Studies*

Received : 18.02.2026

Accepted : 12.03.2026

Published : 14.03.2026

DOI: 10.64938/bijsi.v10si5.26.Mar023

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Abstract

Jaishree Mishra is considered to be one of the greatest Indian writers of English literature. She has written eleven internationally acclaimed novels in English. She has not claimed to be a feminist but she shows special interest towards women's issues in Indian society. Mishra is a committed writer who breaks conventional stereotypes of Indian women through her protagonists in her fictional writing, ensuring that they are not vulnerable in all occasions. Her female protagonists are educated and determined in empowering their position in the patriarchal society they live in. She has dealt with post-colonial themes and concepts such as, gender discrimination and women subjugation. Janu in Ancient Promises has been introduced to readers as a young girl who has completed a secondary school education, and has been given in marriage to a man from Kerala by her parents. Janu's identity as a self-respecting woman becomes in question after her forceful marriage. In this regard, how she escapes from the shackles of marriage and proves her identity as self-respecting women and mother after a great struggle against the patriarchal structures will be discussed further below.

Keywords: post-colonial, patriarchal, gender discrimination, subjugation.

A society runs on two wheels- man and woman. But from the day that girl babies are born, they are constantly reminded of the things which they are not allowed to do. In contrast, when a boy is born into a family, friends and relatives express their happiness. A son to them means insurance. He will inherit his father's property and get a job to help and support the family. However, when a girl is born, the reaction is very different. Some women weep when they find

out their baby is girl because, to them, a daughter is just another expense. In *Ancient Promises*, for example, the parents are shocked when Janaki, a Malayali girl brought up in Delhi falls in love with a North Indian boy, Arjun, especially when she is in her teenaged adolescent years. Her parents are shown to be reacting in haste and Janu is brought to Alleppey, a city in Kerala to end the forbidden relationship, and quickly marriage proposals are



brought forth and she is forced into a marriage to Suresh. Despite the fact things have not changed radically at present, women are more conscious of their rights and the need to create a space for themselves. Jaishree Misra's focus on gender discrimination proves to be fight for women's rights, special justice and equality. So, Janu, the protagonist is not a complex structured woman but a woman who is ready to fight against social injustices done to her by the patriarchs who dictate her life. Janu's parents are not aware of women's education, identity and choice of life partner, instead they are hasty in arranging marriage her their daughter and they stick on the social stigma which urges them to get their daughter married at the earliest. This decision of her parents leads Janu to her deplorable condition; she loses her identity as Janu but has to accept the wife of Suresh in her in-law's house. She is never treated as one among them; she is always the 'other'. Simon De Beauvoir, the pioneer of feminist theory, in her *The Second Sex*, comments about the pitiable state of women thus:

"One is not born, rather than becomes women. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine". (267)

Janu's encounter with new culture, language and situations is so deep that she faces each and every mental and emotional attack from members of her in-law's house alone. Janu's conversation and replies in English deems her an arrogant woman who always insults the in-laws especially by Suresh's mother. The protagonist Janu is treated as the 'Other' by both men and women. Janu's mother-in-law mocks her as a stranger because of her Delhi life and English education and they never let her to be a part of the family. "Look you're not in Delhi anymore. Like it or not, you now live in Kerala, so I suggest you drop all these fashionable pleases and thank yours. Here we don't believe in unnecessary style" (AP 86). Janu's normal behavior is misunderstood and she is

totally ignored by Suresh. As a woman, Janu tries to convey her emotional feelings to her husband, but, Suresh does not even have a normal conversation with her in day-to-day life. Meanwhile, Janu is psychologically so depressed and her self-consciousness urges her to take steps for her freedom at time she is confirmed with pregnancy.

Women in patriarchal society are objectified, to be subjugated and underestimated that a woman's arrival to a family means she is to be a slave who must dance according to the family's music. Janu has been suppressed as wife and as daughter in law, but when she gives birth to a girl baby with inadequate mental ability, or in other words a special child, Janu determines to take decision that her daughter should not be brought up in this family, fearing that she also will be ignored and neglected. Above all, Janu fears her daughter maybe exploited mentally and physically. Consequently, Janu takes up an essential role as a strong mother, a revolutionary who wants to keep her daughter in the place where she is respected. Thus, Janu applies for the special training program in the learning planning, where she can become a special teacher for special children in schools and for the sake of her own baby.

Janu rejects unnecessary moral tides, conventions, hierarchy and other patriarchal formulations that make a woman a defenseless entirely. Janu also believes that and confidence to project her individuality to the society where she is restricted with minimal mobility. As she writes,

I am tired of fighting off my family, they have proven their love for me in the 18 years. It has taken to bring me up. And just can't believe they'd push me into something That would be wrong for me. I know you think of it as a stupidity blind kind of trust but there it is. (AP 7).

However, Misra depicts that things do not go her way. The birth of female child Riya brings her new life. She finally decides to fight against for her husband and in-laws. Thus, Janu emerges as a bold character that fights for her rights; complete her education and specialization in occupational therapy. At this point Janaki shows a lot of willpower and



becomes openly rebellious against her husband Suresh and she says,

She, Riya was not going to provide me with a passport to their love and affection, she did not affect her own herself. My struggle was over... I was free, I neither had to struggle for approval anymore nor could Riya through some hopeless loop... my own right had now seemed ...worth fighting for but Riya needed me to be her voice and a battle on her own behalf would be far more satisfying. I was soon going to become a thorn in the Maraar family. (AP 9)

Janu's change is hasty and determined. She does not want to think of the consequences and she focuses only on her daughter 'Riya'. She decides to get divorce from her husband and to fly away to London with her daughter. She completes her own education for the special children and luckily, she meets her old school friend Arjun in London and he extends her a helping hand in pursuing her goals. Janu's journey from an innocent girl to a matured

woman and mother, her experiences in life brings her realization when she settles her life with her daughter in London.

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