

# From Subjecthood to Fluidity: A Lacanian Reading of Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises*

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**Abstract** - This article has analyzed the Novel *Ancient Promises* (2000) written by Jaishree Misra from a psychoanalytical-feminist perspective using Lacan's theory of The Name-of-the-Father and Helene Cixous, *écriture féminine* to accentuate the weakened power of the Phallogocentric discourse in the formation of the female subjects. Jaishree Misra, a present-day Indian Novelist, takes us deeper into the consciousness of her women character and addresses her qualms, predicaments, and motivations. She states her discernments as a modern woman writer who writes women. In this semi-autobiographical novel, Misra portrays Janu as a silent subject according to Lacan's Symbolic order and later on accepts a reverse path towards self-fulfillment and actualization. Jaishree Misra employs the method of deconstructing the Patriarchal discourse and elucidates a woman's rear journey from these patriarchal norms to liberation by rejecting something finite, structured, and meaningful according to the patriarchal system.

**Index Terms** - Feminine Discourse, Female Subjecthood, gender fluidity, Phallogocentric Language.

## INTRODUCTION

The Novel *Ancient Promises* (2000) written by Jaishree Misra discloses the struggle of a young girl Janaki, who is unwillingly agreeing to a marriage at the age of eighteen to fulfill the desire of the family relinquishing the man of her choice. This article analyzes the trajectory of Janu applying the Lacanian The Name-of-the-Father. The Name-of-the-Father is an important concept proposed by Lacan, which is a form of imitation of social and power structures. As an infant, the child receives boundless care from the mother, the first Big Other; however, the Big Other is slowly taken to the world of power structures that one must follow. This begins with an introduction to the language that makes one feel estranged due to separation from the mother and comfort. This is

because language is not natural as such. The Name-of-the-Father could be accessed through authority figures such as parents and teachers, the police, or the law, or societal norms. One's life begins to center on conventions one must follow to survive and live in the Symbolic Order begins. The desire, which emanates through a lack or absence, begins to make itself known. Thus, the Name-of-the-Father makes itself known through power, social structures, absence and estrangement, repression of fantasies and castration from the same, and prohibitory figures. It is a form of control. Janu as an ideal Lacanian child conforms to the symbolic order and as an ideal subject willingly plays her fixed roles in the symbolic order. But her desire for self-actualization leads her on the path of subversion and rejection of the patriarchal codes. As Julia Kristeva puts it, "If women have a role to play, it is only in assuming a negative function: reject everything finite, definite, structured, and loaded with meaning, in the existing state of society. Such an attitude places women on the side of the explosion of social codes." (Kristeva, Elaine, and Isabelle).

Janaki's story begins in Delhi, as a carefree young schoolgirl who falls in love at the age of sixteen. Her love life and freedom end as she conforms to the patriarchal norms and agrees to marry a man of her parent's choice and is married to a very traditional and patriarchal Nair Family on her eighteenth birthday. "Woman is introduced into the symbolic pact of marriage as an object of exchange along basically endocentric and patriarchal lines. Thus, the woman is engaged in an order of ex-change in which she is an object; indeed, this is what causes the fundamentally conflictual character of her position- I would say without exit. The symbolic order submerges and transcends her" (J. Lacan 304). She is submerged into the symbolic norms of the marriage pact. She has no say against it, she allows her dreams to be marred,

gives up the desires of getting educated and marrying a man of her choice.

“At the age of eighteen, “I know better now, of course, that I was only fooling myself. I had been meant to come here all along. It had all been written so many centuries ago even the writer would have struggled to remember where the real beginning lay. And I was flattering myself if I believed this was just my story. A mere word in a paragraph on a page of the story is what it was. But just as a woolen sweater start to unravel if even one stitch were taken out, I don’t suppose I could have asked even for a word in the story to be taken out or rewritten” (Misra 7,8). Janki expresses her grief at her entry into the symbolic order. She abandons her needs and loves life like an obedient Lacanian child. This Female protagonist is aware of her position in the symbolic order. Her story is pre-written, and she is unable to change or reverse even a single word. Her unwilling acceptance of the marriage was due to her fear of displeasing her parents. One yes from Janki would make everyone whom she loved in her childhood happy. Lacan offers an understanding of how the subject has been misled into believing that the access to his fantasy is bound up with an all-powerful other who will punish all forms of transgression ( (Rabate 200.) The very acceptance of the Name-of the Father or laws and order of culture and language pre-vents the possibility of intimacy between Janaki and Arjun, essential to reach closer to the image of being “one” formed in the Imaginary order, thus never allowing fulfillment. She later also develops a Lack for Arjun, which she attempts to fulfill, by trying hard to become a part of the Marar family. Duplication of Desire happens when one is removed from Real and is unable to be satisfied. These further distances the pursuer from the Object of Desire. (Lacan). She duplicates her desire for Arjun and a life she desired by displacing it on Suresh and his family striving for acceptance and love at the cost of one’s of desire and love

“I am quite happy like this, learning to cook and things. Women should know to cook, shouldn’t they?” It was amazing how my priorities had turned upside down in a short period” She easily gives up the idea of pursuing a BA and trying to fit into a pre-written female self. Ego ideal (SE 22 P.65) is termed and coined by Freud to define certain parental traits that the child will appropriate to fortify his sense of identifying with these traits involves mimesis, but it

also mobilizes the child’s energy to be and to do things that, in turn, will bring narcissist gratification (pitching the ball like dad, ‘being a good girl according to parental directives, etc. “I was so eager to avoid doing anything that risked displeasure” 93. Her priority became her being accepted by her husband’s family. Thus she preferred to have a child rather than getting educated that she thought would change her status in the family. She struggles to fit in with this symbolic patriarchal system. Her attempts to perform the role of an ideal wife and daughter-in-law relegate her identity to the background.

A woman is groomed for a subordinate position from her childhood. She is taught to be reverent and courteous, an obedient daughter, passive wife, agreeable daughter in law and a forfeiting mother. Janaki expected it to be easy to change her position from a daughter-in-law to a daughter. But soon was disappointed. They looked down upon her; specially made rude remarks about her Delhi upbringing and the low financial status of her family. She half expected to find an ally in her husband whom she thought would compensate for all that she missed. Unfortunately, there too she experienced indifference. They both were functioning from totally different realms Suresh from dominance and Janu from Subordination. Suresh could look at his wife as only his possession thus undervaluing her individuality and identity. Marar Family is unwilling to accept this eighteen-year-old as a part of their family. She feels lost among the crowd, frantic but unable to raise her voice slowly internalizing the Feminine virtues of silence, forbearance, and fitting in. The Phallic culture has domesticated this woman.

Suresh, Janu’s husband never attempts to find a solution to her problems. Whenever he was confronted he took an easy escape through his business trips leaving Janu to face it herself. Even after the birth of a mentally retarded child Suresh could not offer his wife the much indispensable support that she was most in need of. He was disappointed with the child and found his escape in business and drinks. This trauma of her life leads her to give up all these desires to be accepted and loved in the symbolic system. “Even our unconscious desires are, in other words, organized by the linguistic system that Lacan terms the Symbolic order In a sense, then, our Desire is never properly our own, but is created through fantasies that are caught up

in cultural ideologies rather than material sexuality” (Felluga).

Janaki as an ideal female subject starts by acting the Symbolic part of herself. Under the traditional cultural codes of patriarchy, Janaki is held in place as the female Other by the ideologies of the male Self during this part of the novel. As an ideal daughter, wife, and mother she demonstrates a Symbolic existence. Dependent, weak, and vulnerable she lives out the traditional feminine role. Subjected to the Law of the Father through matrimony and maternity she reflects an ideal woman. With her loneliness and lack of support in bringing up a mentally retarded child her life comes to a standstill. In Janu's words “I was exhausted, I didn't realize at first that it wasn't Riya who exhausted me as much as my desire to have her appear lovable and be accepted by the Marars”. (Misra 132)

In the middle section of the novel voice of the Semiotic Self is heard. Disrupting the paternal cultural codes Janaki, in the second part of the novel, steps out of the Symbolic and initiates a reverse progression in the Lacanian axis.

Demands and desires can never be fulfilled in the symbolic order. Her realization brings her to abandon her demands and desires of being accepted and loved, which liberates her “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” (Misra 132). She plans her escape from India in pursuit of training in special education and finding a well-equipped special school for Riya. Her secret movements find success as she gets a call from Delhi for an interview for the scholarship.

There she meets with the imaginary situation when she meets Arjun her first love. She realizes her other self with whom she wants to merge with. She let herself experience the fulfillment of her desires. Misra pitches her passionate encounter as a challenge to the Conjugal purity a patriarchal norm. With this confrontation with the other self, she plans her return journey.” She re-experiences the physical pleasure that was repressed by The Name-of-the-Father. She recognizes and asserts her jouissance by subverting phallogocentric oppression at its deepest levels. She does not think about the structure or societal codes neither rationalize nor evaluate the pros and cons of such behavior but plunge into a physical relationship with

her lover. The return journey to the real is not easy, the guilt, blame, and choosing a path that is less trodden would make it more challenging. “With every word I uttered I knew I was taking one more unreturnable step into the territory previously trodden only by very foolish and very bad women” (Misra 219). Being well aware of the consequences and on her family, she took her stand to assert her identity and reclaim her happiness and a life of her desire.

Re appearance of Arjun in her life was a fortunate event for Janu but others, it seemed facile and sleazy even her mother turned her happiness into her pain others easily will convert it as sneering laughter. Her craving for a better life or a life of her desire and to write her own story of life met with anguish and doubt even by her mother. “She was silent; the concept of better simply did not exist for a woman of her generation who took what they were given with tolerance and fortitude. I knew I was wondering how in bringing me up so carefully she had got it so wrong. Why had she failed to teach me acceptance? Wasn't it merely arrogance to think that we could take matters into our own hands? To take over the writing of our own stories?” (Misra 236). Mother as a fully conformed subject of the patriarchy trains her daughter to do things that are accepted in society. She accepts her widowhood like any other woman would do in society withdrawing her from all pleasurable activities and confining herself to the four walls of the house. She could not comprehend Janu's aspiration for a life breaking away from the norms of society. Janu's relationship with Arjun was also unacceptable to her. Even though she is not fully convinced of the path chosen by her daughter wishes her return to her husband but from the moment she realized her daughter's life would be in danger she reverted from her symbolic path and supported her daughter to find her way back to her happiness and freedom. She encourages Janu to go to England without Riya as she was sure that Riya would be returned to them and support her daughter to get a divorce from Suresh. ). “The dream was over; sleep had fled and the status quo returned to more or less to this original state. (Misra 4). Janki the protagonist elucidates her reversal journey to the Real which she has entered fighting the patriarchal norms. As Julia Kristeva explains, it is a journey from symbolic to semiotic. “Ma sitting up as close to me as she could get, seemed to be absorbing some much-needed warmth from our longed-for

proximity. “It was strange that I’d had to come back to her to be set free again Almost as if it couldn’t be done without that final blessing” (Misra 4). It could be considered not only as an illustration of mother-daughter proximity but also could be seen as a journey from symbolic to semiotic. From The-Name- of- the-Father to the mother. By pausing a question to marital purity and reclaiming her voice and desires Janu regain a voice of her own, a feminine voice against the patriarchal discourse.

### CONCLUSION

Janaki as a symbolic subject is forced to act in a fixed and pre-written role. Her weakness and vulnerability are at their peak in the beginning stages of her Subjected to the Law of the Father through matrimony and maternity she reflects an ideal woman. Unsettling the paternal cultural codes Janaki steps out of the Symbolic and initiates a reverse progression in the Lacanian axis. She regains her voice which was silenced. She is laying out before us a difficult path to freedom. Janu affronts the Symbolic Order and violates the hierarchy in the establishment which had fixed her identity in the place of the female other through the gender-specific role. She ultimately disrupts myths supporting control of their individuation and does not desire to estimate herself to ideal womanhood.

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