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MYTH AND REALITY IN JAISHREE MISRA'S *ANCIENT PROMISES*

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary relevance of the mythical texts has taken over all over the world. The ideal and judicious stories of these texts set examples of morality amidst the society since ages. Revisiting and re-analyzing the enigma of the prominent female character Sita as a woman of physical and mental suffering has taken a new relevance. Exploring different aspects of her life by comparing and contrasting with the twenty-first century 'new woman' is the main objective of this paper. Jaishree Misra is a contemporary Indian English novelist whose debut novel, *Ancient Promises* (2000) is an overview of the continuity and departure of the condition of women in the socio-cultural aspect of contemporary Indian society. It intends to focus on the transformation of the women characters from docile and dependent to bold and independent. The novel presents the true picture of the present Indian society and impresses upon the fact that despite being educated and modern, women suffer from grave inequality even today. The only difference is that twenty-first century women do not accept it as their fate by keeping their mouths shut but they believe in fighting for their identity and individuality.

Keywords: Myths; feminism; new woman; continuity; departure.

Introduction

Mythology has always been a great source of study in literature across the world. The purpose behind writing mythical themes in contemporary Indian English literature is to figure out the relation between the present and the ancient past. The mythical women characters are mainly considered as symbols of chastity and purity. The myth of Sita in the *Ramayana* stresses the devotion of a woman towards her husband. Whereas, the myth of Savitri also identifies women as self-sacrificing. The images of women are always portrayed as life-giver, self-sacrificing, submissive and representing ideal womanhood. The story of Janaki or Sita is one of the most popular myths in Hindu mythology. She is famous for her obedience, faithfulness and devotion towards her husband Rama. She was a foundling, adopted by king Janaka. After marriage, she suffered a lot as a sacrificing ideal wife who gave up all her comforts and needs. Rama, Sita and Lakshman leaving their homeland Ayodhya face many grave challenges and hardships but Sita being a woman was doubly victimized. Abduction, fear of rape by king Ravana and later giving proof of her chastity resonate her experience of being a woman in ancient

time. Sita is a marginalized queen, whose decisions were dominantly influenced by the patriarchal orders of the time. T. Latha quotes Sudhir Kakar's saying in *Feminine Identity in India*:

The idea of womanhood incorporated by Sita is one of chastity, purity, gentle tenderness and a singular faithfulness which cannot be destroyed or even disturbed by her husband's rejection, slights or thoughtlessness... Exclusive devotion to one's husband becomes the prerequisite for the important motherhood of sons.... To be a good wife, is by definition, to be a good woman... (qtd in Latha 104).

The similarities between the idyllic women represented in the epics are far away from the modern woman facing different circumstances in Indian background.

Background of the Study

India, being a patriarchal society has always given women a secondary status. Women in India have been subjugated since ages. Even in many ancient texts or literatures, woman has been portrayed as a creature being oppressed, tortured and silenced by the society. From this it is clear that women in traditional Indian society are expected to be silent, dependent, not vocal about their own feelings and opinions, obedient and submissive. In Manusmriti, Manu says: "A woman should never have freedom, when they are young, they should be under their father, after marriage, they should be under their husbands, if their husbands die, they should be under their sons" (qtd in Kumari 49). Women, in conventional societies like India, face difficulty in articulating their voice, living lives on their own terms and are in constant fight for the improvement of their status in the society. Women are suppressed just because of their gender, often referred to as *pativrata* (loyal to her husband) and *abla* (helpless). Therefore, the mythological figures are always shown as submissive, obedient, faithful and dutiful. S. D. Bhat rightly opines in the research paper: "Through centralizing Sita, the perspective of the reader is deliberately and pointedly shifted to empathizing with her experience of hailing from a royal family, being a partner in her husband's life, trials and tribulations; and being suppressed because of her gender" (Bhat 194).

With time, faces of both the society and its literature have changed. The efforts of several generations of Indian English writers could be seen in comparison and contrast between tradition vs modernity. The patriarchal system of Indian society has always created the image of women as docile, vulnerable, powerless, subordinate, marginalized and silenced creatures. Several writers like Arundhati Roy, Githa Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Bharati Mukherjee, Kamala Markandaya, Kiran Desai, Amitav Ghosh, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Raj Kamal Jha, Jaishree Misra etc., have depicted the worst socio-cultural condition of women. Women are often pitied as helpless, prone to violation and other dangers. As Spivak asserts in her notable essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (qtd in Dhand 316). Lately, the ideal traditional woman was replaced by the 'new woman'. The 'new woman' started questioning the age-old traditions and wanted to set herself free from them. This led to the mythical image of women being satirized by the contemporary Indian English novels like Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* (1975) and *The Holder of the World* (1993), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister* (2014) Amish Tripathi's *Sita-Warrior of Mithila* (2017) and many more.

Ancient Promises: Textual Analysis

Jaishree Misra represents the new image of women in the modern age. She has undoubtedly earned her position in the canon of contemporary Indian English literature. Through her wide range of works, she has tried to position herself as a writer presenting the condition of women in contemporary Indian society in a realistic manner. Her female characters are no more just the victims of the patriarchal system of India but they seem to be more independent, ready to fight for their individuality and identity. They aren't the stereotypical images of Sita and Savitri but women as independent entities, growing and developing according to their own capacity, choice and understanding. Jaishree Misra in her debut novel, *Ancient Promises* (2000), is an attempt to narrate the story of a woman named Janaki or Janu who is trapped in a loveless marriage with her husband Suresh who is twenty-six and a half years old, a fair bit older than Janu. The self-explanatory title of the protagonist, Janaki or Janu is no way similar to the character Janaki or Sita of the Ramayana. Though, she is seen initially as

subservient, dependent and succumbed to the patriarchal attitude of her husband but later in the novel, she fights for her individuality, equality and dignity through her actions. Janu is a revolutionary character which is evident through the transformation of her life from a woman who is fragile and weak to a woman who is strong and independent. The novel begins with the line: "My marriage ended today" (03). Janu is a dominant feminist voice in the novel who questions the patriarchal system and stands strongly against this system. Just after getting trapped in the loveless marriage, Janu is sure about fleeing "from it soon, leaving wedding sari and wedding photographs and wedding pain behind" (06). She is a proper Kerala girl, though born and brought up in Delhi. Janu, who's just seventeen informs that a "Maraar family were interested in me for their younger son" (53). The family is in search of a "pretty girl, preferably one from a family without too much money" (53). Janu secures a place at Miranda House for a BA in English but she is told, "English Literature is something you could even do from home" (54). For this arranged marriage, she had to let go not only her studies but also Arjun, the love of her life. Janu is considered as an "incredibly lucky girl even to get a proposal of marriage from a family as wonderful as that" (54). Janu is reluctant to marry too early but her mother thinks "...it's easier to adjust to new situations when you're younger" (61). As Dr. Deepika Dhand rightly quotes Simone de Beauvoir famously remarking in her path-breaking work *The Second Sex*:

Woman has always been man's dependent, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality. Commenting on the condition of the married women, Beauvoir avers, Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society. she further says... One is not born but becomes a woman (qtd in Dhand 316).

The marriage ultimately proves to be unhappy and unfulfilling. She knows that the pain derived out of her empty marriage could only be lessened when she keeps herself busy in studying or job. The suffering of her life is augmented when she gives birth to a girl named Riya who is mentally handicapped. Janu is such a powerful, strong, bold woman that instead of cursing her fate and sitting idle, she fights not only for her own happiness but also for her daughter Riya. She does everything to make her feel normal like any other kid. She takes her own decisions and improves the life of herself and her daughter. She decides to start afresh a new life abroad for the sake of her daughter so that she could "show her to some SPECIALISTS there" (159). She wants to escape from that terrible marriage and therefore manages to get a scholarship. She understands how important it is for her to be happy and only then she would be able to spread happiness around her. She becomes adamant to divorce her husband and live abroad with Riya and Arjun. She asserts her point saying: "We're not happy together. That's the point. I'm not happy with you, I suppose I've never been. It's not your fault, I suppose, we're just different. We seem to need different things from life" (217). Finally, she says out of satisfaction: "That was probably it, all these years that I had silently borne an unhappy marriage..." (221). Her mother for whom divorce is not a word in her dictionary, questions her by saying, "Was it really that bad, moley? Bad enough to leave?" (236). Janu knew that things definitely were not intolerable but wasn't good enough both for her and her daughter. She knew it was her right to live her life in a better way but also knew about her mother, "'better' simply did not exist for women of her generation who took what they were given with tolerance and fortitude" (236). Misra explains how "women hung on in unhappy marriages to be able to give their daughters away respectively into hopefully not-unhappy marriages. And the daughters went on to have, if they were lucky, just slightly unhappy marriages but soon had daughters they would need to get married off some day" (303). As a representative of the modern woman of the twenty-first century, Janu stands for compassion, courage, love, sacrifice, patience and free-spirit in the novel.

Conclusion

Mythology has undoubtedly an indispensable role in the study of literature down the ages. It helps in building up the relation between the past and the present. The mythical characters are the true representation of the traditional values and culture of the society. On one hand the significant characters like Sita are described as 'Shakti', full of power and on the other hand, they are considered as 'Other' in the patriarchal society of India. Literature not only compares but also contrasts the picture or image of these characters like Sita and Savitri to the contemporary period. The idea behind these writings is to secure a female's position in society by highlighting their pitiable condition in the ancient time. Jaishree Misra cultivates her character in contrast to the

Janaki or Sita by giving her protagonist the same name but different attributes altogether. Misra's Janaki or Janu raises her voice against the situation forced upon her and does not believe in surrendering to the situation she is trapped in. The novel reveals the critical condition of the present-day women and how they voice and identify themselves different from the myths.

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