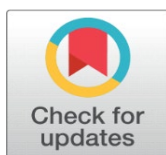
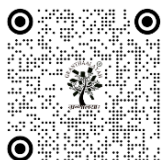


INTERSECTIONALITY AND IDENTITY IN JAISHREE MISRA'S ANCIENT PROMISES: FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON CLASS, GENDER, AND RACE

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ABSTRACT

This paper utilises a rigorous feminist theoretical framework to comprehensively examine Jaishree Misra's influential work, *Ancient Promises* (2000), emphasising the complex dynamics of intersectionality and identity. By closely analysing the experiences of the protagonist, Janaki, we uncover the intricate interplay between class, gender, and race within her Kerala heritage and Delhi upbringing. Our exploration delves deeply into the multifaceted layers of Janaki's identity development and reveals the significant challenges she faces as a woman of colour navigating patriarchal structures. Our inquiry extends beyond Janaki to examine how other female characters are depicted to highlight their diverse backgrounds and experiences that shape their intersecting identities. Through investigating these intersections thoroughly across various characters' journeys, our study aims to enhance scholarly discussions on the subtle complexities of gender, race, and class in contemporary literature while providing valuable insights into women's experiences within broader sociocultural contexts.

Keywords: Class, Feminist Theory, Gender, Identity, Intersectionality, Race, Women's Experiences

1. INTRODUCTION

Women writers have demonstrated the gravity of their work, particularly in addressing issues that demand attention and advocating for women's liberation. Their literary contributions have played a crucial role in raising awareness within society regarding the needs and aspirations of women, serving as a platform for self-expression and empowerment. By engaging in discourse on gender disparities and the injustices faced by women, they challenge entrenched patriarchal norms. When discussing Feminist criticism, the Penguin Dictionary says, "... It questions the long-standing, dominant, male, phallogocentric ideologies, patriarchal attitudes, and male interpretations in literature" (338).

Contemporary Indian women writers, both in English and regional languages, have critically examined evolving social landscapes and championed the emancipation of women while dismantling patriarchal structures through the portrayal of resilient characters.

The evolving landscape of contemporary Indian women's literature reflects a robust commitment to advancing the cause of womanhood. Their narratives have effectively instigated societal change and highlighted prevalent disparities and social inequities. Their literary endeavours empower them to challenge social and cultural constructs that restrict their autonomy and perpetuate institutionalised marginalisation. Notably, Indian English authors have made significant strides in the literary realm, with figures like Jaishree Misra gaining widespread acclaim for groundbreaking works such as her debut novel, *Ancient Promises*.

Jaishree Misra, born in 1961 into a Malayali family in New Delhi, is an esteemed Indian author renowned for her literary contributions. Despite being raised in a military household and experiencing a lifestyle seemingly influenced by Western culture, she pursued her academic endeavours. She earned a Master of Arts in English Literature from Kerala University. Her literary journey commenced with the publishing of the highly acclaimed novel *Ancient Promises* in 2000. Since then, she has authored numerous other novels including *Accidents like Love and Marriage*, *Afterwards*, *Rani*, *Secrets and Lies*, and *Secrets and Sins*, along with the publication of *Scandalous Secret*. In addition to her prose works, Misra has also released a collection of poems titled *The Little Book of Romance* within eight years, showcasing her prolific creative activity.

Throughout history, it is evident that females have been writing about women's issues to make society aware of their plight and show them the usually fabricated reality. Many women writers have spoken on the causes and evils of society, the segregation, and the bias females face as the 'others' in society. *Ancient Promises* is one medium that openly discusses these issues and tries to work on them. Jaishree Misra has showcased the resistance of the women characters in the tempests that arrive in their lives. They are born from the same ashes and stand facing the world, showcasing their power and grit.

The novel *Ancient Promises* is a poignant portrayal of a young woman's quest for self-discovery amidst challenging circumstances. The protagonist Janaki, also referred to as Janu in the novel, undergoes a series of trials and tribulations following her relocation from Delhi to a traditional family in Kerala, where she grapples with feelings of displacement, marital disillusionment, and familial discord. Despite her efforts to assimilate into her new surroundings and forge connections with her husband's family, Janu encounters resistance and hostility, leading to isolation and alienation.

In the novel, the portrayal of characters like Janaki sheds light on the condition of Indian females within society. "I was now (let it be whispered) a divorcee with a child. A tainted woman, a woman with a past" (Misra 304). The words "let it be whispered" suggest a sense of shame or secrecy surrounding Janaki's status as a divorcee, indicating the societal stigma and judgment associated with divorce, particularly for women in traditional societies like India.

Janaki's characterisation of herself as "a tainted woman, a woman with a past" underscores the societal attitudes and expectations that surround women who have experienced a divorce. In many cultures, divorced women are often viewed through a lens of judgment and moral scrutiny, with their marital status serving as a marker of their worth and respectability.

Through Janaki's reflection, Misra highlights the complexities of gender and marital expectations within Indian society, shedding light on how divorce can disrupt traditional notions of femininity and challenge entrenched power dynamics. Janaki's struggle to reconcile her sense of self with society's expectations serves as a poignant commentary on the enduring stigma surrounding divorce and the limitations imposed upon women's agency and autonomy.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study utilises a qualitative approach employing content analysis. Through systematic investigation of primary and secondary sources, the research aims to explore intersectionality within *Ancient Promises* comprehensively. It delves into how characters' social identities intersect and influence their experiences. Furthermore, the paper examines the implications of intersectionality in broader socio-cultural contexts, emphasising feminist perspectives to enhance understanding of class, gender, and race intersections in literature.

3. INTERSECTIONALITY AND IDENTITY

Intersectionality is a theoretical framework examining the intricate interplay between overlapping social identities and corresponding systems of oppression or discrimination. This perspective explores how various biological, social, and cultural categorisations intersect, simultaneously shaping individuals' experiences across multiple levels. Instead of being merely abstract, intersectionality encompasses essential elements crucial for comprehending identity and social dynamics. It is widely used across contexts yet often misunderstood or oversimplified. In *Beginning Theory*, Peter Barry states that Intersectionality is the recognition of multiple interrelated identities (Barry 38).

Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term 'intersectionality' in 1989, describes how interlocking power systems affect those most marginalised (Cooper, 2016). When we apply intersectionality to feminine identity, we recognise that women's experiences are not homogeneous but are shaped by a multitude of factors, including race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, disability, and other identities.

Intersectionality recognises that various systems of power and oppression intersect and exacerbate each other, resulting in distinct forms of discrimination and marginalisation for individuals with multiple marginalised identities. Analysing intersectionality and identity in Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises* is crucial for understanding the characters' experiences and broader societal contexts depicted in the novel. By exploring the intersections of social categories like gender, class, and race, we can gain deeper insights into the characters' motivations, struggles, and interactions within the narrative.

Intersectionality helps us to point to fruitful and complex marginalised locations. "It does not do the work for us, but tells us where to start and suggests kinds of questions to ask" (Garry 3). Intersectionality identifies marginalised locations and allows us to identify marginalisation's complex and fruitful locations within the narrative. Intersectionality highlights the compounding effects of various systems of oppression on individuals with multiple marginalised identities. Analysing this framework in Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises* is essential for understanding the characters' experiences and societal contexts. By exploring intersections of gender, class, and race, we gain deeper insights into motivations, struggles, and interactions. Das (2026)

Intersectionality guides us to complex marginalised locations, suggesting starting points for analysis. In *Ancient Promises*, characters face marginalisation based on gender, race, and class, shaping their experiences. This approach prompts us to move beyond simplistic analyses and consider how multiple identities intersect.

Centering marginalised voices provides a comprehensive understanding of identities and experiences. Janu's struggles reflect broader societal tensions, highlighting how dominant ideologies perpetuate discrimination.

4. INTERPLAY OF CLASS, GENDER, AND RACE IN JANAKI'S LIFE

Feminism has long recognised that gender identity is not in all contexts the determinant and that other identities—race, class, caste, religious community—intersect and are relevant for understanding particular issues (Menon 69).

The relationships that define class, gender, and race are theoretically distinct but empirically confounded by the social processes of "emulation" and "adaptation" that generalise and institutionalise each of these forms of "durable inequality" (Hogan 3). Hogan suggests that while these forms of inequality are theoretically distinct, they become intertwined and perpetuated through social mechanisms that generalise and institutionalise them.

In *Ancient Promises*, Janaki's life trajectory is deeply influenced by the complex interplay of class, gender, and race. Through her marriage to the affluent Maraar family, Janaki grapples with societal norms linked to her lower socioeconomic status, gender, and cultural background. These intersecting identities mould Janaki's experiences, determining her opportunities, social interactions, and self-perception.

Janaki's journey illustrates the intricate dimensions of identity, where her Malayali heritage intersects with her urban upbringing, gender, and social class, shaping her self-image and interactions. She navigates the challenges of her dual cultural heritage and the complexities of intersecting social identities. Janu's reflection on her upbringing as a Malayali girl in Delhi underscores the intricate dynamics, where her sense of belonging is divided between two distinct cultural landscapes:

That these two places ran together in my blood, their different languages and different customs never quite mixing, never really coming together as one. And when, as a Malayali girl growing up in Delhi, with Malayali parents but Delhi

friends, and Malayali thoughts but Delhi ways, I also decided to fall in love with a Delhi boy, who was never really going to be welcomed in my Malayali home. (Misra 18)

Janu's identity is influenced not only by her gender and regional background but also by her class and cultural upbringing. 'Look you're not in Delhi anymore. Like it or not, you now live in Kerala, so I suggest you drop all these fashionables Pleases and Thank Yous. Here we don't believe in unnecessary style' (Misra 80). Through her experiences, we gain insight into the complex dynamics of identity formation and how intersecting social identities influence individual behaviour and perceptions within diverse societal settings.

4.1. CLASS

Barry's assertion, "Race and class complicate the operation of patriarchy" (173), emphasizes how intersecting systems of power shape individuals' experiences. Socioeconomic status influences access to resources, affecting one's ability to challenge or perpetuate patriarchal norms.

In *Ancient Promises*, protagonist Janaki encounters marginalisation due to her lower social status than her affluent husband's family. Despite her intelligence, Janaki struggles with her new social status, facing pressure to conform to her in-laws' expectations.

The Maraar family's disdain for Janaki's background is evident in their treatment of her, reflecting systemic barriers faced by individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in asserting their identity and agency:

'Is that how you hang the sari blouses in your house? We do it like this.' And I would rush to rearrange my wet, newly washed blouse hanging shamefully on the line next to the smartly folded Maraar ones, done just so. Even a badly hung blouse could announce to everyone that there was an intruder in their midst, one that could never ever measure up to the others. There for the fish-seller and the gardener and the next-door neighbours to look at and laugh at. (Misra 109)

The act of hanging sari blouses on the clothesline symbolizes the class disparities between Janaki and the Maraar family in *Ancient Promises*. Janaki's attempt to hang her wet blouse alongside the neatly arranged blouses of the Maraar women is met with disdain and ridicule, marking her outsider status and lower social standing within the family. The meticulously arranged Maraar blouses represent class privilege and social status, contrasting with Janaki's poorly hung blouse, which becomes a source of embarrassment and highlights her inability to conform to her affluent in-laws' standards:

We should have known back then that a girl brought up in Delhi would simply not be right for us. Just yesterday I was telling Shaila not to go to all these Delhis and Bombays in search of a girl for her Pramod. There are plenty of nice, well-brought up, unspoilt girls here. (Misra 112)

The statement by Janu's mother-in-law, "...a girl brought up in Delhi would simply not be right for us," suggests a bias against individuals from urban, cosmopolitan backgrounds, particularly those associated with metropolitan cities like Delhi and Mumbai.

The implication is that individuals from urban centres are seen as culturally and socially distinct, possibly possessing values or behaviours incompatible with the speaker's community. This reflects a stereotype of urbanites as cosmopolitan and worldly, perhaps even "spoiled" or morally compromised compared to those from more rural or traditional backgrounds.

The reference to "nice, well-brought up, unspoilt girls here" idealises individuals from the speaker's community or region, portraying them as embodying traditional values and virtues. This reinforces class-based superiority, with specific social backgrounds considered more desirable or suitable for marriage partners.

4.2. GENDER

In patriarchal societies, entrenched gender roles confine women to predefined roles as caregivers, homemakers, or subservient individuals, perpetuating a cycle of gender discrimination through cultural, economic, and social institutions.

According to Nivedita Menon in *Seeing Like a Feminist*, "freedom of choice" is constrained by social categories like economic class, race, caste, and gender, making true freedom elusive (167). This limited agency is exemplified by challenges individuals face, such as a domestic servant's child aspiring to become a doctor or a woman seeking to control her own future (Menon 167).

Societal expectations and gender norms suppress Janaki's sense of self, compelling her to prioritise her family's needs over her own desires. Her struggle reflects broader societal pressures on women in patriarchal societies.

In *Ancient Promises*, Janu is objectified and transformed to conform to the Maraar family's standards, particularly in her physical appearance, highlighting pervasive gender discrimination within societal norms and expectations, especially regarding marriage and familial approval (Misra 92).

Furthermore, the Maraar family perpetuates systemic gender discrimination by delineating traditional roles for men and women within the household and business, excluding women from economic decision-making and empowerment (Misra 99).

This gender discrimination is reinforced through socialisation and cultural norms that confine women to roles as caregivers and homemakers, restricting their access to economic opportunities and autonomy. These patriarchal structures uphold power differentials, perpetuating gender inequality and subordinating women within the family and society.

4.3. RACE

In academic discourse, race is a multifaceted and socially constructed concept that significantly influences cultural belonging and societal structures. Historically, racial identity has been intertwined with power dynamics, privilege, and oppression. Racial hierarchies, rooted in colonialism and imperialism, have played a central role in shaping social classes and gendered practices. This intersectionality between race, gender, and class creates a structural recursivity wherein these elements mutually influence and reinforce each other within societal systems.

According to scholars, race encompasses categorising individuals based on physical characteristics such as skin colour, facial features, and hair texture. However, it's crucial to understand that race is not solely a biological or genetic distinction but a social construct shaped by historical, cultural, and political factors. Racial categories are frequently used to justify inequalities and hierarchies, perpetuating discrimination and marginalisation against certain groups while privileging others:

Racial identity is one of the more significant elements in the production of cultural belonging. racial hierarchies cannot be separated from the ways in which social classes and gendered practices are developed. There is thus a structural recursivity among race, gender, and class, where the racial and gendered elements form part of the ideological system of legitimation. Changes in the race-class-gender articulation might very well allow a racialized group to evacuate the space of the inferior. (Chowdhry and Nair 79)

Race intersects with gender to create unique experiences of oppression and privilege for women of different racial backgrounds. Women of colour, for example, often face intersecting forms of discrimination based on both their gender and race. This intersectionality highlights the complexities of identity and power dynamics within feminist movements, emphasising the importance of addressing race alongside gender in discussions of inequality and social justice. '...But he still had some last-minute instructions. 'Racism,' he said, getting into the car and leaning out of the window, 'just cross the road if you feel threatened in any way. Never react. However angry you feel' (Misra, 275). The instruction Arjun gives to Janu serves as a stark reminder of the systemic discrimination and danger inherent in navigating racialised spaces, where individuals of minority backgrounds are vulnerable to harassment, violence, and prejudice:

It wasn't a perfect world. I had once had an empty coke can kicked at me by a distinguished-looking man and realised, with some shock, that people in Barbour jackets were capable of racism too. Not all my course mates had been as kind, as Ailish and Susan. Some of them never once bothering to speak to me, unwilling probability to waste their time with people from far-away worlds who would never understand the rigours of their teaching careers in inner-city schools, burdened further now by the new National Curriculum and Education Act. (Misra 280)

The incident of having an empty Coke kicked at Janaki by a distinguished-looking man underscores the startling reality that racism can be perpetuated by individuals from all walks of life, regardless of their outward appearance or social status. Her realisation that people in Barbour jackets, often associated with wealth and sophistication, are capable of racism challenges the stereotype that racism is confined to specific demographic groups or socio-economic backgrounds.

The reference to the National Curriculum and Education Act further contextualises the protagonist's experiences within the broader socio-political landscape of educational reform. Despite purported efforts to promote inclusivity and

diversity within educational institutions, the protagonist's encounters with racism underscore the persistent barriers faced by individuals from marginalised backgrounds in accessing equal opportunities and recognition.

5. JOURNEY OF OTHER FEMALE CHARACTERS

In *Ancient Promises*, the narrative follows Janaki's journey from subjugation to freedom, both physically and psychologically, while also exploring the experiences of other female characters like her mother, Amma, and grandmother, Ammummaa. Across three generations, these women assert their societal positions, particularly without male figures to oversee or support them.

Despite facing adversities, these women find solidarity and support in each other, mainly through shared experiences of sorrow. Amma, like many Indian mothers, guides Janaki to understand love beyond mere infatuation and encourages her to maintain her cultural roots, standing up for her daughter's well-being despite personal grief.

Janaki's mother profoundly understands her daughter's struggles, especially within the Maraar family. Amma's unwavering support proves pivotal in Janaki's battle for autonomy and mental well-being when her husband attempts to confine her to a mental hospital. Amma remains resolute in protecting her daughter despite pressure to salvage the family reputation.

Janaki acknowledges her mother's sacrifice, highlighting the depth of maternal love and resilience. She reflects, "'To my surprise, Maa said firmly, 'No, there's no going back now for Janu, Rama. She's right; the time for that has passed. I will not get a moment's sleep if she returns to that house. God knows what Suresh could do to her in a temper'" (Misra 260).

Initially adhering to traditional norms, Janaki's grandmother eventually openly expresses her viewpoints as she witnesses the turmoil, contradicting her previous beliefs. She asserts her opinions despite their contradiction to once-held customs:

This was greeted with one of Ammumma's finest snorts, 'The Maraars! Fine people they are to stop our Janu from doing what she can for her daughter! They will not spend five minutes to help Janu with Riya, but that Padmaja has always got one of her darling Sathi's kids attached to her sari pallu like glue.' Both Ma and I looked at Ammumma open-mouthed. The Maraars had never been candidly discussed between us before. It would have taken complete blindness or utter stupidity not to notice that they weren't the loving, supportive in-laws my family had hoped for. But the disappointment had always remained unspoken, mainly because there was little that anyone could do about it. What was the point in going on about something that could not be changed? (Misra, 160)

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, exploring intersectionality within the context of *Ancient Promises* offers profound insights into the intricate web of oppression and privilege that shapes the characters' lives. Janu's experiences as a woman of colour from a disadvantaged socio-economic background in a patriarchal society illustrate how gender, class, and race intersect to influence her social standing and treatment by others. By delving into these intersections, readers gain a deeper understanding of the systemic inequalities that impact the characters' narratives and relationships.

This analysis of intersectionality enhances our comprehension of the complexities inherent in gender, race, and class dynamics as depicted in literature. Through critical engagement with these themes, we gain valuable insights into the nuances of power dynamics and the resilience of marginalised individuals. As scholars and readers, we must centre the voices and experiences of those facing intersecting forms of marginalisation, amplifying their narratives and advocating for social justice and equality. By continuing to explore and discuss these issues, we contribute to the ongoing discourse on intersectionality and identity, fostering a more inclusive and equitable society for all.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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