



Parenthood The Gates of Joy and Dread: A Reading of Jaishree Misra's Ancient Promises

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Parenting remains a mystifying subject about which almost everyone has opinions. It is the principal and continuing task of parents in each generation to prepare children of the next generation for the physical, economic, and psychosocial situations in which those children must survive and thrive. This paper therefore addresses questions about the positives of parenthood, the purview of parenthood and present-day problems of parenthood. Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises* turns one's attention to the nature and dimensions, the conditions and the concerns of parenthood.

Jaishree Misra, an Indian author was born in 1961 to a Malayali family in New Delhi. She started her writing career in 2000. Misra's life is as dramatic as her books. As a Keralite, growing up in an army family in Delhi, Jaishree Misra lived an apparently Western lifestyle. She fell in love as a teenager, but was directed into an arranged marriage with a fellow Keralite instead. Misra managed to get an MA in English Literature from Kerala University. The marriage was a disaster, and worsened with the birth of a mentally challenged child. *Ancient Promises* vividly states how changes affect the usual 'Indian' ways of parenting. The present generations' style of living is more complicated than the parents find difficulty in conforming to the new culture.

Today's world is heavily competitive. When a person strives hard to progress in his business, earn a degree, or experiment his plans, he needs to maintain a good rapport with his co-workers. Starting from a peon to a manager in a company, everyone needs to have good interpersonal relationship. Though interpersonal relationships have their own significance, a person encounters such relationships only when he faces the society. Till then, intimate relationships make an individual ready to handle these interpersonal relationships. The first and foremost intimate relationship one has is with one's followed by one's father.

The intimate relationship of parents towards their children is wholesome and natural. Parents love their children best because they are their own flesh and blood. Children are the fulfillment of their parents' love. Children make their parents feel stronger than ever before. Sometimes, children are the ones who provide the reason for their parents to hold on firmly to their married life. A couple, even after giving birth to their third child takes pleasure in parenthood:

You are the one we held on to so tightly. You are the link with our past, a reason for tomorrow. You darken our hair, quicken our steps, square our shoulders, restore our vision, and give us a sense of humor that security, maturity and

durability can't provide.

When your hairline takes on the shape of Lake Erie and your own children tower over you, you will still be our baby. (Chicken Soup for the Mother's Soul 141)

Jaishree Misra in her *Ancient Promises*, highlights the constant struggle that goes on between Janu and her parents because of her love affair. It is a novel that gives equal importance to the anxiety that parents of a teenage-girl undergo and the urgent need for girls like Janu to be understood by their parents.

In *Ancient Promises*, Janu's first meeting with Arjun happened through Leena. After a couple of weeks of their encounter, Janu and Arjun started having casual meetings. They shared same interests. Janu was worried if, she, a sixteen-year-old, was ready to experience that splendid feeling called 'love.'

When she was a cat on the wall, not able to identify if it was love or not, she thought about her parents. She had never before kept a secret unknown from her parents. But now, the secret of loving Arjun and hiding it from her parents was sheer thrill.

Janu's father was totally against the concept of love marriages. He had never liked young people falling in love nor wanted his daughter to get influenced by all the 'love' ideas that go around her.

I was fairly sure my parents would disapprove; I'd heard Dad harrumph loudly at love scenes in films, worried they would fill my head with silly notions. Love, for him, had been the stirring in his heart when his mother had shown him the picture of a fresh-faced girl she'd chosen for him to marry eighteen years ago. This running-around-trees business was for film stars and fools, he often said. (Ancient Promises 23-24)

Janu was never sure of how she was going to label her relationship with Arjun to her parents. One fine day, she asked if she could bring her friends home as they kept pestering her for South Indian 'dosas.' Janu's mother, knowing that one of the friends was a boy, gave an alarming look: "How long have you known him? Who is he? How do you know him?" (*Ancient Promises* 24). Janu stayed cool by saying that he was just a friend. Her mother immediately retorted:

'I don't know,' she said doubtfully, 'I never had friends like that when I was growing up. You have to be careful, you know, there's lots of boys out there who will be only too willing to take advantage of pretty girls.' (*Ancient Promises* 24-25)

Janu's parents led a conventional life and wished the same for their daughter. The idea of a child taking a decision regarding her future partner was unimaginable to them. They believed in children settling in life with their parents' choicest blessings. Both Janu's mother and father had left the most important decisions in their lives to be taken by their parents. They firmly felt that their parents knew what would be the best for them.

As Janu's parents had fixed beliefs and values, Janu's world was an enigma to them. The kind of comrades and experiences Janu had was totally unheard of by her parents:

My world was a confusing one for them. They were so sure that I would be safest among my own people, marrying eventually into my own community. But I had all kinds of friends and all kinds of experiences that were alien and that couldn't be stopped. Arjun, unfortunately, would fall firmly into that category he was the wrong age (too young), wrong community (not Malayali), and came at the wrong time (I was too young). (Ancient Promises 26)

Jaishree Misra, apart from giving attention to Janu's parents, also picturizes Leena's and Arjun's parents in a different angle.

Leena's parents were open-minded people and they gave her permission to invite boys for her birthday bash. As the daughter of a pilot and an ex-stewardess, Leena enjoyed much freedom. All her friends really envied her because she was the only one who was allowed to have boyfriends and boys at her parties. Janu's parents gave her permission to attend Leena's birthday bash and to stay at Leena's place that night. This gesture by Janu's parents revealed their trust and love for their daughter. They too gave the necessary space and liberty that a daughter needs.

Similarly, Arjun's parents gave him the necessary independence. As he grew, this helped him make right choices and stand independently. His mother was in England and many people had believed that Arjun's parents had been divorced. But, the fact was that Arjun's father did not want to disturb his son's education in India and at the same time to look after his farm. Arjun felt that his father was more than a friend and that he could share anything under the sun with him. He trusted that his parents simply doted. It was this basic element of trust that made Arjun's parents let him do whatever he wished to do.

As days passed by, Janu and Arjun started to meet at Chor Minar. The excuse that Janu gave at her home was 'drama practice' and 'Mathematics tuition.' Soon, Janu was caught red-handed by her parents and it was here that she lost the trust and love of her parents, especially her father's. She had said that she had gone for a special Mathematics tutorial class when her father's friend saw her with Arjun sharing a bowl of soup noodles. Her father was enraged when Janu lied:

In blind, raging confusion that his little girl had become a woman without anyone bothering to tell him. . . . All the anger . . . at having ever left Kerala, at having carefully attempted to bring up a daughter in a thankless place like Delhi, at

having been deceived by the thing he most loved in the world . . . all seemed to be coming out at me, with that horribly swishing cane. (Ancient Promises 48)

From then on, Janu lost all her freedom. She was taken to school and picked up by her parents. She was not allowed to use the phone and was accompanied by someone wherever she went. Her parents stopped her play practice and tuition. It looked as if her world had suddenly shrunk and life became bitter. She started spending all her time in her room and kept looking at her text books.

After Janu finished her schooling, she desired to continue her education. But, her parents had given up all hopes in sending their Janu to college. Though she was offered a seat at Miranda House College for a B.A. Degree in English, Janu's parents strongly felt that college was an apt place only for girls who are serious and studious and who could remain 'loyal' to their parents' trust and money.

Meanwhile, Arjun had secured admission at Hull University and had decided to join his mother in England. Janu, during her visit to Kerala, was engaged to one Mr. Suresh. It appeared that Suresh hailed from a reputed family. Janu agreed to it as she wished to compensate for upsetting her parents.

In Ancient Promises, the mistake is on both the parents and the child. Janu accepted things as they came, in order to satisfy her parents. Then again, Janu's parents kept her affair with Arjun in mind and felt that their daughter can be safe and secure only if she enters into wedlock. They failed to understand that it is a process of growing up and their daughter would understand herself as she grows.

Children absorb new culture and ideas at a young age. Janu's idea of 'dating' looks strange and shocking to her parents. Jaishree Misra emphasizes the urgent need to restore culture in its right perspective. The author, in her novel Ancient Promises, takes effort to make her readers understand the full spectrum of emotions, from the heights of total delight to the depths of grief, as children grow from babyhood to adulthood. In the beginning, couples enjoy their new role as parents. But, as their children grow, they create unwanted anxiety in parents. Jaishree Misra overtly conveys the message that parenthood is complex as it involves a relationship between two different generations. The incident of raising children can be an assorted bag, of both joy and sorrow.

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