

EMANCIPATING THE 'SELF': UNRAVELLING THE ENTANGLED MARITAL BONDS IN JAISHREE MISRA'S ACCIDENTS LIKE LOVE AND MARRIAGE

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Received: 19 Apr 2019

Accepted: 25 Apr 2019

Published: 30 Apr 2019

ABSTRACT

Violence against women is one of the most echoed occurrences in the contemporary society. The patriarchal Indian society defined various gender roles and behaviours appropriate to create the difference between man and woman. These set behavioural patterns marks women as inferior and man as superior. Post-independence, the constitution of India initiates various steps to unyoke women from the traditional roles that detain her under the patriarchal custody. Jaishree Misra's novels are narratives that unlock the involuted relationships that entwine the woman's 'self'.

*A popular Indian woman novelist, Jaishree Misra demonstrates the patriarchal injustices that subordinate women under the clutches of Institution of marriage. Indian society believes that the life mission of a girl is to live subordinated to the patriarch assigned to support her. According to the patriarchal society the quintessential element of a girl's life is her marriage. Marriage exhibits a prosperous life for a young girl, but the reality lies in the fact that it shuts the vents of her emotions and hopes. She is forever hushed and expected to abide the norms of patriarchy, laid down generations before. Misra's novel *Accidents like Love and Marriage* narrates the unforeseen frolics by unfolding the universal dilemmas of love and marriage. The novel bespeaks that, marriages and falling in love are unavoidable accidents in one's life.*

KEYWORDS: *Patriarchy, Subordination, Self, Assertiveness, New-Woman*

INTRODUCTION

With the publication of her semi-autobiographical novel *Ancient Promises* in 2000, Jaishree Misra acquires a predominant position among the Indian English women writers. Her novel campaigns against the subordination of women. She prompts her female readers to strip off the oppressive forces that subordinate them. She teaches them to resist and fight for their 'self' and to feel proud to be a woman. Her novels exhibit contemporary real-life women protagonists fighting for their 'self' and evolving as the 'New-Woman'

Women, being an integral part of the society, the progression of any society or culture are impossible without the active involvement of women. Yet the society does not recognize her worth, marginalizes her and is impartial to its women subjects. As a result, feminism as a movement originated to safeguard a better position for women in the patriarchal dominated world. The socially construct aspect 'gender' differentiates man and woman which creates inequalities and hierarchal structures in the society.

Feminist critics point out that the patriarchal society considers marriage as a legitimised institution to subordinate a woman's existence and that a woman is destined to serve her patriarch. Simone de Beauvoir in her masterpiece *The Second Sex* points out that,

In marrying, the woman receives a piece of world as property; legal guarantees protect her from man's caprices; but she becomes his vassal. He is economically the head of the community, and he thus embodies it in society's eyes. She takes his name; she joins his religion, integrates into his class, his world; she belongs to his family, she becomes his other 'half'... She is annexed to her husband's universe; she gives him her person: she owes him her virginity and strict fidelity. She loses part of the legal rights of the unmarried woman. (454-455)

Feminism in India emerged as a reflection of the various reform movements of the west during the early nineteenth century. Women in India are equated to Sita and Savitri. Embodying them as Self-denying women. They are in total surrender to their male counterparts. Indian society is keen to develop in their girl children feminine qualities of submission and obedience. They are moulded with traditional images and strict monitoring to ensure that they nurture female qualities. Thus, gender discrimination is initiated since the birth of a child.

Indian women writers successfully portray in their plot, women characters who are entangled by marginalisation, suppression and oppression. Their writings paved way for women to free themselves from years of patriarchal control. Indian literature across genres and languages narrates the frolics of marriage as a predominant theme. The Indian women writers unfold the truth that marriage is a weapon for the patriarchy to subordinate and marginalize women. The contemporary society witnesses the tumults created by love and marriage.

The overriding theme of Misra's novel *Accidents like Love and Marriage* also reflects the same. It is a tale narrating discordant relationships of love and marriage. She mocks at the people who blame themselves for these accidents not knowing that these are unavoidable. The novel revolves around the three families, the Sachdev's, the Menon's and the Singh's who represent the contemporary society with whom each one of us can easily relate to.

The younger Sachdev falls for the intelligent young Gayathri and the elder Sachdev resorts to a romance abroad which changes the destiny of relationships in the whole novel. Though the Sachdev's are wealthy they still abide by the tradition and culture. Rohit the elder Sachdev is married to Neena, daughter of Kammy and Manny the wealthy Singh's. Both the families being rich, they were the matched couples married as per their parent's decision.

Swarn Sachdev, mother-in-law of Neena is the commander of the family. Misra presents the tangled marital relationship through Swarn and Jagdish. The society views Swarn as an ideal wife as she pretends to the society that they lead a harmonious life, being submissive and obedient to her husband. But in reality Swarn Sachdev despises her husband, "having to have a husband was one of life's cruel ironies for a woman like Swarn who did not especially enjoy male company" (3). Misra further records her hatred as,

The thought of her husband's laundry filled her with dread; she still endeavoured to have one of the maids pick up all the clothes he threw around when he returned from his factory at the end of the day. She supervised and sorted, albeit from a distance as she did not like any sort of assault on her delicate olfactory senses, and her husband's smells were no exception to this rule. (3).

Jagdish is a successful businessman and little does he want the society to know the mishaps in their marital life. So, he lets his wife rule the household, “the most obvious being Jagdish who had learnt (about ten days into their marriage) that he would always and only occupy a very small part of Swarn’s heart” (4)

Neena and Rohit were more privileged couples. They had a better relationship than their parents. Neena is educated and hails from an equally wealthy family. She adores her own freedom. Through Neena, Misra divulges the power of education in empowering women. She is the modern daughter-in-law, despised by the traditional mother-in-law.

“Modern-day daughters-in-law, she realised, do not hang around waiting for permission or blessings as they did in her day... daughters-in-law did not just announce their departures and up and leave like that, more over wearing such strange tight clothes!” (50)

Neena is unwilling to be a submissive daughter-in-law according to the expectation of her in-laws and the society. But Neena is a much obedient wife. Marriage, for Neena is a sacred institution. Neena is blind love with Rohit. The thoughts of her husband betraying her is far from her mind. She argues with her friend Shonali who says, “Married! What the hell, Yaar, as if that’s ever stopped anybody! Shonali retorts scornfully. ‘Which era have you been living in, honey? Every married person I know is having an affair’” (105). Neena leads a happy and contented married life until the bitter truth of Rohit’s adultery is revealed to her.

Neena and Rohit according to the society were perfectly matched couples because she being the “daughter of an equally wealthy Delhi business family”(6) and their marriage brings for both the families prospects to enlarge their business territories. Both the families thus were equally interested in this matchmaking. Rohit embodies a loyal husband and an affectionate father. On his visit to London for a business purpose Rohit meets Tracy and falls for her. Neena who had been a pativrata wife is disconsolate by this incident. Rohit’s deceit reveals that less understanding between the married couples brings disaster in the family bonds. Though Neena expects Rohit to be romantic, paying attention to all her needs she silently adjusts to the non-reciprocal attitude of Rohit knowing it to be a necessary act to keep the marital bonds intact. But she transforms herself when she is revealed of her husband’s illicit relation with the foreign lady Tracy. She inherits her mother’s feminist traits and “transform herself suddenly into the free-spirited unafraid, feminist Kammy has always wanted her to be” (206). Here Misra exhibits the power of an educated woman by making Neena bold and courageous. She dejects her perfidious husband and walks out as the ‘New-Woman’ adoring her ‘self’. She represents those women who can no longer be made submissive to the patriarchal injustices through the institution of marriage. She is Misra’s representative of the ‘New-Woman’ of the contemporary society. She pays no heed to the norms of the patriarchal society. she embraces her freedom by breaking the leash of marital bonds that thwarted her existence.

Gayathri, Neena’s friend returns to Delhi after pursuing her Ph.D. from Oxford University. Misra through Gayathri, further stresses on the fact that education empowers women. Being wealthy, Neena’s parents were able to spend lavishly on her marriage. But for Gayathri’s parents only gift they could give her was education. “She had plenty of money, her parents’ money, to fall back on, unlike Gayathri, for whom education was the only gift her parents could confer” (52). Still her father says “This country of ours is no place for a single girl. People won’t let you live in peace, even if you have a good career and house and all” (121). On the contrary to her parents wishes, Gayathri returns to India having marriage as a long-lost dream. “Her face has worn a distant look whenever marriage had been mentioned these past two days. Her parents will never know that marriage is an institution she has grown scornful of during her years in England”

(52) She confesses to Neena about her broken relationship with an Englishman Michael, that had tampered her dreams of marriage and love.

Raji remarks that “girls in her time and in the small town of Varkala where she had grown up had never been encouraged to think too hard for themselves”(54). Raji is worried on Gayathri’s reluctance to get married. To safeguard her own interest Neena tries to match Gayathri and Tarun, the younger Sachdev through marriage. She plays the cupid role between Tarun and Gayathri. Hailing from a South Indian middle-class family Swarn Sachdev did not approve Gayathri as her daughter-in-law. The Menon’s were illtreated by Swarn Sachdev.

Misra confronts the conflict between the tradition and modernity. Swarn as a mother-in-law represents traditionality, she expects an obedient, ‘door-mat’ daughter-in-law seeking permission from her for everything and be at the service of the in-laws. She despises Neena for being independent and modern. Swarn thinks that Gayathri being Neena’s friend would also share similar attitude and thus rejects her son’s relationship with Gayathri. Not being a Punjabi or from a wealthy family Swarn detests Gayathri. She says that ““ Madarasi! I have no time for Madrasis! Funny blacky people who say aiyyoaiyyo and make a mess eating sambar idlis!”(131).

Misra also represents the changed perspectives of a woman related to marriage. It is to be noted that Gayathri has less interest in getting married. She decides to meet Sachdev’s only out of the compulsion from her parents. She was made to compromise her decisions, but she tells her parents, “You are just going to meet them. To get to know them better, so that you are not complete strangers to each when Tarun and I do agree to get married” (174). Misra’s Gayathri is a strong woman. She has her own decisions and opinions. But the readers are in a state of confusion when Gayathri, “above-average good looks with floods of tears as she lies on her old bed”(205). It is unable to recognise for whom she is crying Tarun or Michael. Misra’s Gayathri, a Ph.D. holder from Oxford University and a professor in Jawaharlal Nehru University still craves for a love-bloom in her life. But she is also assertive in her decisions. She is not ready to compromise her decisions anymore. Gayathri represents a feminist in her. Though she encounters with accidents of love twice, she develops courage in herself to overcome these accidents. She embodies a natural ability to overthrow the situations that subordinates her ‘self’.

Through the various characters in the novel Misra not only unfold the plight of the tangled relationships but also exhibits the alienated self of her female characters. The emotional alienation in a man-woman relationship leads to marital discords similar to Jagdish -Swarn and Neena-Rohit. Courageous Gayathri resembling the ‘New-Woman’ speaks to the readers that despite the accidents that occur in a woman’s life, a woman should adore self-esteem and be courageous to decide and live her life independently as well as assertively.

Misra’s women protagonists are strong and self-assertive. They possess the attributes of ‘New-Woman’. They realise the catastrophic impact of subduing their female ‘self’ by the patriarchal society. They break the chains of repression that quash their determination to shatter the oppressive forces around them. The women characters resist the psychic despotism from their male counterparts through self-determinism and assertiveness. They traverse their ‘alienated self’ to the ‘empowered self’. They realise their feminine consciousness which installs in them the strength to abandon their husbands or lovers and relieve themselves from the androcentric clench that subdue their ‘self’. They thus evolve as the ‘New-Woman’ embracing their autonomy.

The constitution of India has made many amendments since independence to support, empower and reduce violence against women. But in reality, similar to the women in Jaishree Misra’s *Accidents Like Love and Marriage*

women of the contemporary society face inequalities and discriminations. The root cause of it being the patriarchal system that needs a wholesome revision. Misra thus through her protagonists bespeaks that the key towards women empowerment lies in the hands of women themselves. Gathering courage and empowering themselves with self-determinism and assertiveness will open the new dawn of freedom for women. The protagonists of Misra are not willing to succumb their life with wifely duties. They are unwilling to exist in a place where their existence is actually questioned.

Misra's protagonists are essentially the 'New-Woman' intending to take the 'road not-taken'. They are determined, assertive and independent. They represent the plight of the contemporary women and opens for the women readers a new path towards independence.

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