

## PLACING MOBILITIES AND MOBILISING PLACES: DIS/RE LOCATING JAISHREE MISRA'S *ANCIENT PROMISES*

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### **Abstract:**

*Jaishree Misra occupies a significant seat in the gallery of Indo-Anglian writers. Her first novel **Ancient Promises** has garnered her wide popularity and critical acclaim. The novel *Ancient Promises* spins around the life of Janaki or Janu, who at a younger age was trapped in a love less marriage. Janu's displacement or transplantations to different places, whether it is Delhi, Kerala or London had a significant effect on her life and each of her journeys after her marriage, culminating in her migration to London had contributed much in shaping Janu into a bold woman. The paper tries to look into the significance of the metaphors of mobility, like travel or migration and their association with the concept of place. The paper strives to investigate how the 'places' affected, shaped and defined Janu's life and how the metaphors of mobility are intertwined in the plot and its significance in the story.*

**Keywords:** Culture, Home, Migration, Mobility, Place, Travel, Woman.

Jaishree Misra is reckoned as one of the outstanding authors in the gallery of Indo-Anglian writers. Her first novel *Ancient Promises* (2000) catapulted her into the pinnacle of popularity. The novel which is deemed as 'semi-autobiographical' traces the life story of Janaki (Janu), which proves to be an emotional rollercoaster. The novel narrates the life story of Janu who was born to a Delhi settled Keralite parents. Janu, who was basking in the warmth of her first love with a Punjabi boy, Arjun was suddenly transplanted to Kerala and was put into the shackles of a love less marriage with Suresh who belonged to the prestigious Maraar family. The snobbish Maraars, never accepted her into their bosom and was engaged in showering insults and ridicules thereby emotionally vulnerating the young and fragile bride. Her peripheral status in the house was cemented when Riya, the child born to Suresh and Janu turned out to be 'mentally handicapped'. Realizing that all her attempts to acclimatize in the Maraar house is futile; Janu weaves dreams of escape for herself and Riya. The novel then proceeds with Janu's determination to fly abroad with Riya, her meeting with Arjun, the crafty connives of the Maraars for not granting her divorce, her life in London and her struggles to get back Riya from her husband. The story culminates in a positive note, with Janu being granted of her wishes and starting of a new life together with Arjun and Riya. The novel thus captures the transformation of Janu from a young and vulnerable girl to a strong willed, emancipated woman.

The story with its realistic sketches deftly portrays how Janu was churned by ordeals and stiffened by the circumstances. This transformation is unfurled in the backdrop of 'shifting' places or Janu's migrations from one geographical landscape to another. According to Doreen Massey, 'Place', "can raise an image of one's place in the world, of the reputedly (...) deep meanings of 'a place called home' or, with much greater intimations of mobility and agility, can be used in the context of discussions of positionality" (1). Janu's life at Delhi is also depicted with all its nuances. Her familiarity with the Delhi life style and her parents' penchant for 'everything' from her native land, also gives the readers a glimpse of the immigrant experiences at Delhi. Janu who was born and brought up in the lap of Delhi was transplanted into her native land of Kerala. In the outset of novel, Janu's remembrance about Kerala was filled with nostalgia for an

idyllic landscape glistened by the affection of her grandparents and other relatives. She relished all her annual vacations in Kerala, till she met Arjun. Kerala, her native land, where she was mostly a visitor was shaped by the figment of her imagination and variegated memories. The small district of Alappuzha, which is her native place, is painted in realistic sketches. Even though she was a maverick in the land, with her broken Malayalam and Delhi manners, she had no acrid experiences to ruminate. But for the first time in her life, after she met Arjun, Kerala and her vacation trip appeared as a villain. "It was the only time I was there but longing to be somewhere else" (Misra 41).

Her last vacation trip to Kerala proved suffocating as she was pushed into wedlock with a boy from a blue - blooded Maraar family. The cultural orthodoxy of Kerala, especially with regards to a girl's marriage is exposed here. Janu appears as an immigrant in her native land. Her marriage and transplantation to the palatial mansion of the Maraars was a sort of migration, leaving behind Delhi, her loved ones and the familiar ambiances. Marriage itself was a sort of diasporic experience for Janu, "though 'diaspora' is now widely used to describe transnational networks of immigrants, refugees, guest workers and so on" (Fortier 182). Similar to most of the girls, Janu was also deracinated from her soil and was planted on a foreign place, where she battled to thrive in all the adverse conditions. But the place where she was grounded, never welcomed her. The manners, the pompousness and even the free flowing Malayalam of Maraars were not familiar to Janu. Her Delhi manners and broken Malayalam was ridiculed and deprecated. Her mother-in-law remarks: "Look, you're not in Delhi any more. Like it or not, you now live in Kerala, so I suggest you to drop all these fashionable Pleases and Thank Yous. Here we don't believe in unnecessary style" (Misra 80). She, being from an ordinary family was acceptable to the Maraars only because of her father's profession.

Janu tried in all the possible ways to assimilate into their culture and way of living. But she was mercilessly banished by her in-laws. She always stood in the periphery as a demure wife, who is draped in Maraar style to be exhibited in front of the visitors and to be vituperated by the inmates of the house. Her identity and original self has almost eroded in the house and a hackneyed version of Janu, the daughter-in-law was on display. "By the time, I'd worn Sathi's jewellery and the brand-new Kanjeevaram sari... I was somebody else! (...) I stood in front of them, a counterfeit *Maraar*, hiding Delhi insides and a very heavy heart" (Misra 92). Her hope of getting a place in *Maraar* house was completely thwarted when her child Riya was born with learning disabilities. The hypocrisy of Keralites while encountering an 'abnormal' child is also exposed in the novel.

In the course of her ordeals, the only relief that is bestowed on Janu was her sojourn in Delhi for delivery. Her occasional visits to her grandparents' house were also a sort of escape from her suffocating life. Maraars allowed her to go to Thodupuram by boat, "as this would be the least unbecoming way for a Maraar daughter-in-law to travel alone. (...) The boat journey was balm to my saddened soul" (Misra 102). Suresh never used to accompany her. Her mobility is otherwise confined within the Maraar house. She was never given the freedom to go anywhere along with Suresh. Suresh, her escapist husband was always busy with business tours and he embarks on additional trips when he has to encounter any issues of the family. His escapism was more or less linked to his travels. The time he restricted himself in the Maraar house was less. May be he himself was an alien in his house where material prospects were valued more than human relations. Suresh and his father could only discuss business deals and his mother often interfered with some complaints, which was always judged in her favour. When Suresh flew freely across places, Janu was ensnared in the Maraar house. She had to seek permission even to visit her mother. But, her pregnancy and Riya's birth brought certain changes in her life. Janu who had been through all the emotional ordeals at Maraars house gained the freedom to move outside; first to Delhi for delivery and then to special schools for helping Riya. Fortunately, the Maraars with a half mind also granted her the freedom to attend an interview at Delhi for a scholarship. Such freedom for mobility opened ways for her emancipation which culminated in her migration to London and her life with Suraj. Her ecstasy while

reaching Delhi conveys to the readers her feeling of home. But she doesn't resort to an all good perspective of Delhi. She rings in the immigrant issues and the changed countenance of Delhi, but at the same time exposes her love for the place, where she was born, brought up and her memories were stored.

It was not only Janu who shifted from one place to another. Janu's parents migrated from Kerala to Delhi in search for a better life with the prospects of finding good jobs. Their vacation trips to Kerala display their unbroken bond and love for their native land. Arjun's mother who is not present in the novel as a major character is said to be living in London. Arjun, himself has moved to London and his process of adapting with the London ambience was narrated from the nonchalant perspective of a youngster, mixed with humour and innocence. Janu's other relatives are also depicted as residing outside Kerala, leaving behind their old parents in their ancestral houses. Women in the Maraar house were most often constrained to their homes and don't seem to embark on long travels. They make small trips to relatives' houses, especially to gossip or for attending functions. Janu was abhorrent towards such trips, which are filled with pompous displays and back-bitings. She was always reluctant to take part in such trips, but as an obedient wife and a Maraar daughter-in-law, she silently accompanied them. After the birth of Riya, tired with the Maraar ways, she began to avoid such trips and boldly stated her reluctance. This was one of the first major steps Janu took in seizing her freedom and life. But, as mentioned earlier, Suresh is always busy with his trips. Thus travel, mobility and migration revolves around the novel signifying different meanings. For some, such migrations are forms of transplantations, for others they are short term visits or 'escapist' sojourns and for somebody like Janu it was something different. Her funny vacation trips to Kerala, her forced transplantation to the land, her relief on travelling to Delhi for delivery or interview and her migration to London are closely woven with the fabric of her life story. Her freedom is intricately woven with her mobility; "...for it does seem that mobility, and control over mobility, both reflects and reinforces power" (Massey 150). Her gradual possessing of freedom to determine to which places she need to go and which she had to avoid (households visited by Maraars and wedding locations) is in par with Janu transformation from a demure girl to an emboldened woman.

The novel not only depicts these questions about roots and routes, but also raises more complicated questions of home and identity. Janu who is a native of Kerala was considered as an alien in her land, by her in laws. Her mother-in-law acrimoniously remarks "We should have known back then that a girl brought up in Delhi would simply not be right for us" (Misra 118). She is regarded as a Keralite in Delhi and as 'Delhiwala' in Kerala. She belonged to both, but was excluded from both. Janu opines: "...Kerala had failed to take me, (...). Despite all the futile attempts at sari-wearing and Malayalam-speaking, I had failed abysmally to fit in" (Misra 168). She had a hybrid identity. Janu was having a liminal existence as she was not completely being assimilated into both the places. "...these two places ran together in my blood, their different languages and different customs never quite mixing, never really coming together as one" (Misra 18). Her manners and gestures were the product of a Delhi lifestyle, but were deemed as south Indian by Delhi natives and were thoroughly rejected by her in laws. She identifies Delhi as her home. "Home, for virtually all my life, had been Delhi. Big, busy, bustling New Delhi. Two thousand miles away from Kerala..." (Misra 18). But her parents were keen on marrying her off to a boy from Kerala, their native soil. Her parents, even after spending years were detached from the city of Delhi. Arjun's scorn for many of the Keralite ways and Raghu uncle's reprehensions about Punjabis exposes how people of a single nation bear cultural differences and prejudices against each other.

Centuries of caste, language and religious barriers had validated our prejudices. And had been ultimately responsible for my family's hopes that I could be successfully uprooted and replanted miles away in Kerala, among my own people. The belief had been genuine that I was bound to thrive better there than this alien place with its strange pushy ways. The problem was, I suppose, that Delhi wasn't really as alien to me as it had felt to my parents. If I belonged anywhere at all, this was the place that came closest to it. (Misra 177)

Her migration to England added another place to her chronology. London during her teens was a place to which Suraj migrated. She always imagined of Suraj in London. His letters carved a London in her imagination. London which was a part of her imagination and constructed memory becomes a reality when she migrated to Suraj in London. But her struggles to adapt to the new land were less problematic than her tryst with Kerala. London for her was her dream paradise, because it opened her path to liberty. London offered her an escape from a love less marriage, and nourished her dreams about Riya's future and her life with Suraj. Janu muses: "...the English are usually very pleased to help. I knew though, as Arjun had warned, that it wasn't a perfect world. I had once had an empty coke can kicked at me by a distinguished-looking man and realized, with some shock, that people in Barbour jackets were capable of racism too" (Misra 280). Though there are hints about racism or immigrant issues, her assimilation to the place seemed much relaxed due to the presence of Suraj in her life. Thus, the life of Janu was shaped by places. The 'Place' is not defined by geographical boundaries but,

a 'place' is formed out of the particular set of social relations which interact at a particular location. And the singularity of any individual place is formed in part out of the specificity of the interactions which occur at that location (nowhere else does this precise mixture occur) and in part out of the fact that the meeting of those social relations at that location (their partly happenstance juxtaposition) will in turn produce new social effects. (Massey 168)

The freedom offered by Delhi, the incarceration proffered by her native land of Kerala and her flee to a new life in London highlights the significance of 'places'. Multiple localities and multitude of diverse experiences in these places carved her hybrid identity. "There was always something too Delhi about me and Kerala had not liked that much. (...) The odd thing was that Delhi had never taken me completely to her bosom either, possessing as I always did that faint Kerala edge. (...) . Half way- children, we could have founded a world-wide club of people belonging nowhere and everywhere..." (Misra 169). In her teens, Kerala exuded nostalgia, Delhi was her familiar home and London was a part of her imagination. These conceptions have drastically changed, when vibrant hues of Kerala's nostalgia faded into a harrowing shadow, Delhi became a distant place and London which was only a part of her imagination once became a significant part of her life. She paints a pen picture of the panoramic beauty of Kerala, especially Alappuzha which is revered as the Venice of the East. She sketches with all the subtleties the colourful landscapes, the rhythm of monsoons, the sweltering heat and the ancestral homes which are fading in its grandeur. Not only she adheres to such a description of landscape, but also exposes the hypocrisy and the consolidated patriarchal notions, the aversion to the girls born outside Kerala, stereotyping, gossiping and the prejudices and pseudo-sympathies that are exhibited to children with learning disabilities or to a woman with a broken marriage. The author narrates how the socio-cultural set up of a land or the social interactions affect its inhabitants. "Marriages in Kerala were never just marriages; they were 'alliances'. Alliances between just whom was the bit that wasn't always easy to work out. The parents? Families? Whole clans, reaching back many ghostly generations?" (Misra 66). It is not the geography but the constructed mentalscapes that shapes the life of those who becomes a part of these locales.

Such a conception of places doesn't mean that such socio-cultural set up has to affect all its inhabitants uniformly. Gouri, the sister-in-law of Janu may not have to suffer from the bitter experiences as she was not trained to be the 'demure' daughter in law. Similarly, London or Delhi may offer problems of various sorts which some people may find difficult to acclimatize. Janu's parents or the character of Raghu uncle are apt examples of the 'detached immigrants', who bescorns the lifestyles and pushy ways of Delhi. Janu also underscores about the bond that always pulls somebody to their motherland even when they are on a process of escaping to another land to fulfill their dreams. Janu says: "Kerala was in my blood, now mother to my child. I'd always miss Kerala, however much I hated it sometimes" (Misra 270). So, such perspectives on places don't mean that a particular region is orthodox and the other is not. "...the identities



of places are inevitably unfixed. They are unfixed in part precisely because the social relations out of which they are constructed are themselves by their very nature dynamic and changing. They are also unfixed because of the continual production of further social effects through the very juxtaposition of those social relations” (Massey 169).

*Ancient Promises* as the title denotes, spins around the ancient promises that traverse time, boundaries and generations to inexorably bring people together affecting each other's life, either with loathe or love. It is not only the promises that travel, but also the people changing their destinies, escaping from the conflicts, building dreams or in a relentless search for the feeling of belonging or home. These diverse yet small routes together shape the voyage of life, finding or creating different homes which results in the construction of fractured identities. Janu contemplates: “By the time winter descended in a sad greyness over London, I could feel a sort of belonging, as much as it is possible to belong in large cities anywhere in the world” (Misra 280). The novel, in fact, raises the most pertinent question regarding home; whether home denotes roots or whether it is a place which offers you utmost comfort and thereby, opening up the debates about the associations between place and home. Thus the novel *Ancient Promises* defines Janu's identity which was affected and shaped by mobilities and places, hence conjoining all her trips into the part of a bigger journey, thereby relocating and dislocating her at the same time.

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