Mothers are Saviours: Negotiating Motherhood in the 21ˢᵗ Century with reference to Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises*

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Abstract

Mothers are always seen as a source of immense love, care, protection, patience, empathy, selflessness, and unquestioning devotion. They are also imbued with nurturing and caretaking. Understanding the roles of mothers is not that easy because of their constant need to manage and negotiate their mothering identities. *Ancient Promises* (2000), the debut novel by Jaishree Misra, highlights the contemporary conception of mothers in Indian society and the changes in the traditional image of motherhood. Janu (Janaki), the mother figure, portrays how the Indian society is still beset with gender inequalities. This article will contribute to understanding the contemporary concept of motherhood, both as an ideology and experience. The inability of mothers to fulfill the perceived societal expectations and trying to convince the world of them being a 'good mother' is what the novel looks at. Motherhood is a highly gendered role and therefore, the paper attempts to explore the construction of motherhood in rich and critical ways.

Keywords: motherhood, mother, gender, good mother, social construct

Introduction

Motherhood has always been conceived as core to women's existence, not only biologically but culturally as well. There is no doubt that motherhood occupies a significant position in Indian society but, it also makes women homebound and provides very limited access to the outside world. Jasodhara Bagchi writes: "The paradox of motherhood in the context of feminist theorizing in India was the potent contradiction between ideological glorification of motherhood as *Shakti* (power) and the powerlessness faced by mothers in their everyday lived reality."[1] Traditionally, mothers were expected to conform to the expectations placed on them by society. Their identities were often shaped by others' expectations. The success of a mother was measured through the success of her children. As Chandni Bhambhani and Anand Inbanathan note: "The construction of a women's identity in terms of motherhood in this pronatalist society has roots in ancient *Vedic* literature. The purpose of women, as exemplified in the *Manusmriti*, is to procreate."[2] This

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[1] Jasodhara Bagchi, *Interrogating Motherhood* (New Delhi: SAGE, 2017), p. 2.

[2] Chandni Bhambhani and Anand Inbanathan, "Not a Mother, Yet a Woman: Exploring Experiences of Women Opting Out of Motherhood in India," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 24, no. 2 (2018), p. 161.

suggests 'motherhood' to be "the most naturalized of the highly gendered terms in use,"[3] and it is often meant as "the mother of sons, the keeper of the vamsa or the male lineage."[4]

However, with a little shift in the patriarchal ideology, the traditional image of womanhood/ motherhood also changed. Today, the meaning of the term 'mother' has become very complex as it includes a wide range of women whose roles and responsibilities as mothers vary dramatically. In today's society, the image of motherhood is in flux, constantly in need to fulfill societal expectations and manage their own identities. As Jadodhara Bagchi says: "Some see it as a biological trap in which all their aspiration of the 'person' gets occluded, another group thinks of motherhood as the special power of women, which no man can aspire to perform."[5] In the last few decades, women as mothers no longer remain confined to their domestic spheres but step outside to fulfill their dreams. The traditional image of motherhood no longer fits into the image of the "new woman"[6] of the twenty-first century. Now, women pursue higher education, enter the workforce, and if unemployed, they ascertain their active participation in constructing their contemporary mothering identities. However, the unlimited amount of energy spent on proving oneself to be a 'good mother' based on societal expectations, is yet another attribute set for the performance of motherhood. Sadly, mothers in India are given the least importance in the family as an individual. For the mothers, their right to life and survival are also denied. As Thomas Chandy, CEO, Save the Children India, states: "Shockingly, this is the prevailing reality of millions in our country. We lose 16.5 lakh children every year – one child every nineteen seconds- in India. In addition, women in India have only a 50/50 chance of anyone skilled to help them give birth and, in most cases, they pay with their lives…. The sad truth is that one's chances of survival mostly depend on where one is born and into which strata of society."[7]

Over the past few decades, motherhood has been widely discussed as a socio-cultural construct where women are naturally seen as nurturing, caretaking, loving and selfless beings but it has become crucial to understand how badly as a nation and society, we treat them by pushing them in the vicious cycle of poor mental and physical health. However, Motherhood Studies being recognized as a new field of research helps in determining their (mothers') future. Ivana Brown mentions that "More than 800 books on motherhood were published in the years 1970-2000, the majority of them after 1980."[8] Similarly, Jaishree Misra has also attempted to analyze and examine the nature of motherhood in the twenty-first century Indian society. Attempting to highlight the problems faced by women in India and her own valuable contribution in this field, Misra shares her concern in one of her books on motherhood, *Of Mothers and Others: Stories, Essays, Poems*:

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[3] Bagchi, *Interrogating Motherhood,* p. 34.

[4] Bagchi, *Interrogating Motherhood,* p. 35.

[5] Bagchi, *Interrogating Motherhood,* p. 21.

[6] Ritika Kumari, "Portrayal of the New Woman: A Study of Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises*," *Literary Herald*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2022), p. 62.

[7] Jaishree Misra, *Of Mothers and Others: Stories, Essays, Poems* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2018), p. vii.

[8] Ivana Brown, "Mommy Memoirs: Feminism, Gender and Motherhood in Popular Literature," *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering*, vol. 8, no. 1-2 (2006), p. 201.

> I had been staggered to find that, in India, we lose a child every nineteen seconds to easily preventable diseases and it seemed worth trying to help the organization [Save the Children] employ more health workers to assist struggling families. In such instances, books are my preferred currency because they are more likely to change perceptions than all the money in the world.[9]

Also in her literary productions, Misra draws her readers' attention towards the experiences, concerns, and gendering of women once they become mothers in contemporary Indian society. She explains how her feelings about motherhood helped in tackling this issue as a personal subject:

> I found myself unable… to stay away from motherhood when it came to my writing. My novels have dealt with several aspects of his huge subject: maternal loss, maternal love, bereavement, adoption, rejection… I wondered if this was peculiar to me, the convolutions of my mothering life being the cause.[10]

Therefore, the narrative of motherhood analyzed in the article raises many questions on the social construction and gender conceptualization. It also deals with the issues faced by the contemporary mothers due to the traditional gender practices leading to an increase of conflict and challenges. It also brings into notice that even today, motherhood is observed as a gendered institution. The mothers are often taken for granted so much so that their bodily changes pre and post pregnancy are also overlooked. Thus, it is very important for women to minimize the conflicts inherent in the archetypes of motherhood and establish their own identity. Even though the identity formation for a woman is a complex process, it has become essential to understand the ideology of motherhood against the backdrop of women's mothering experiences.

Conceptualizing Mothering and Motherhood

Adrienne Rich observes that "we know more about the air we breath, the seas we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood."[11] Yet others argue that "the transition to motherhood is a major development in a woman's life."[12] This transition makes women more vulnerable by making them face different challenges beginning with pregnancy and continuing till after the birth. Essentialist ideas about womanhood include the preconceived notion that women are 'naturally' caregivers, selfless, empathetic, patient, nurturing and loving. Kornelija Kuvač-Levačič explains:

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[9] Misra, *Of Mothers and Others: Stories, Essays, Poems*, p. Introduction XIII.

[10] Misra, *Of Mothers and Others: Stories, Essays, Poems*, p. Introduction XVIII.

[11] Andrea O'Reilly, *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), p. 1.

[12] Erfina Erfina, Widyawati Widyawati, Lisa McKenna, Sonia Reisenhofer, and Djauhar Ismail, "Adolescent Mothers' Experiences of the Transition to Motherhood: An Integrative Review," *International Journal of Nursing Sciences*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2019), p. 221.

In order to differentiate motherhood as social institution and cultural construct from motherhood as a woman's real experience, an important study by the feminist Adrienne Rich (*Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* [1976]) has provided us with plausible method. In this work, she differentiates between a) motherhood as an institution (which is determined by the dominant discourse) and b) motherhood as a practice (which presents itself as the individual experience of every woman).[13]

In her book Rich tries to distinguish between motherhood as a biological capacity of a woman to nurture a new life and motherhood as being controlled under patriarchy at various levels. To place more emphasis on motherhood as a cultural construct, Andrea O' Reilly provides her deep understanding of the relationship between 'motherhood' and 'mothering'. She observes:

The term "motherhood" refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood that is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, while the word "mothering" refers to women's experiences of mothering that are female-defined and centered and potentially empowering to women. The reality of patriarchal motherhood must be distinguished from the possibility or potentiality of gynocentric or feminist mothering. In other words, while motherhood, as an institution, is a male-defined site of oppression, women's own experiences of mothering can nonetheless be a source of power.[14]

From the explanation given above, we understand that 'motherhood' is an ideology which glorifies idealized maternal idea and reflects deep-seated patriarchal biases commonly expressed as the very idea of motherhood associated with care and nurturance. Whereas 'mothering' is the real experience of a mother and the un-ending hard-work involved in development of child along with household chores, personal routines and other social obligations. Regardless of how hard and tirelessly woman try to juggle between her job at home and outside, nurturing her family is considered her primary responsibility by keeping her choices, aspirations, and capabilities on hold. In order words, the unending care and unquestioning devotion of mothers are seen as their natural traits. The most common refrains in Indian families are, "'*maa hoti hi aisi hain*' (mothers are innately like that) or with reference to '*ma ka pyaar*' (a mother's love)'" which provides ideas about motherhood in India.[15] Therefore, conventional and normative ideas decide what we know and understand as motherhood or mothering. Terry Arendell opines:

Motherhood is associated with women because universally, it is women who do the work of mothering. 'Motherhood is entwined with notions of femininity', and 'women's gender identity is reinforced by mothering'. Especially since the 19th century, mothering has been presumed to be a primary identity for most adult women. That is, womanhood and motherhood are treated as synonymous identities and categories of experience. 'Yet not all

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[13] Kornelija Kuvač-Levačič, "The Theme of Motherhood in the Autobiographical Discourse of Vesna Parun," *Journal for Literature, Language, Art and Culture*, vol. 18, no. 64 (2017), pp. 206-207.

[14] O'Reilly, *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born,* p. 2.

[15] Amrita Nandy, *Motherhood and Choice: Uncommon Mothers, Childfree Women* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2017), p. 17.

women mother, and mothering as nurturing and caring work is not inevitably the exclusive domain of women.'[16]

In *Ancient Promises,* Janu (Janaki), the protagonist, is a symbol of virtue, selflessness, love, care and empathy. The mother, Janu, is a brave and hard-working woman. She sacrifices her own dreams and conceals the reality of her empty marriage in order to maintain the integrity of the family. It didn't take her long to realize the cruel reality that for a woman, stepping out of an unhappy marriage was not an option. Even after suffering intensely by the hands of her husband, she decides to extend her family hoping this could save her marriage from falling apart. Janu gives birth to a handicapped daughter, shattering her hope of fulfilling the patriarchal demand of a male heir. Hence, motherhood became a site of oppression for both mother and daughter. Janu, however, finds her life in her daughter Riya. At this stage, she understands that she wanted desperately what is best for her daughter. Janu's subjectivity and autonomy as a woman transformed her into a liberating and empowered mother. Nevertheless, this naturalness of mothering to women has given rise to a term coined by Sharon Hayes, a feminist writer, "intensive mothering."[17] Intensive mothering, as Hayes explains, is defined by three themes: "first, the mother is the central caregiver"; second, such mothering requires "lavishing copious amounts of times, energy, and material resources on the child"; and finally, "the mother regards mothering as more important than her paid work."[17] It requires most of the time and energy of mothers in caring, nurturing and looking after the child's education and hobbies so that the child gets the best possible start in life. This suggests that the identity of a mother is associated with the child, focusing on maternal roles, and developing a unique child-mother relationship. Psychoanalytically, the ability and motivation of a mother towards her child's needs are reflected through her identification with the child. Pregnancy may also constitute a time of crisis where women search for their identity but later with the development of mother-child relationship (though, a complex process) it becomes a single unit.

Ivana Brown aptly says: "Motherhood and reproduction play a significant role in the definition and naturalization of gender differences and justification of gender inequality."[18] She also states that it is the biological construct of woman which plays a vital role in causing gender inequality as "[the] biological essentialism is created by the prominent bodily experience related to childbirth, breastfeeding and early stages of childcare and often a disbelief in men's ability to care for children equally well as a mother."[18] Radical feminists like Kate Millet (1977) argued that if male dominance is linked to sexual mode of reproduction, the solution was to reject heterosexual unions. In Simone de Beauvoir's classic, *The Second Sex* (1952)*,* the solution offered was equally radical— rejection of motherhood to gain freedom from being the 'other'.[19] Simone De Beauvoir warns women against having children in which they will ultimately get caught in the duties and sacrifices demanded of her. There are other feminist accounts which believe that this gender

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[16]Terry Arendell, "Conceiving and Investigating Motherhood: The Decade's Scholarship," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, vol. 62, no. 4 (2000), p. 1192.

[17] O'Reilly, *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's of Woman Born,* p. 5.

[18] Brown, "Mommy Memoirs: Feminism, Gender and Motherhood in Popular Literature," p. 202.

[19] Krishnaraj, *Motherhood in India: Glorification without Empowerment?*, p. 21.

inequality is not based on biological differences, but they are the result of social and cultural structures. The existing gender inequality and position of mothers in Indian society are thus reaffirmed through the socially constructed myth of the naturalness of motherhood. We cannot entirely negate the biological fact of motherhood and the idea of it in order to focus on the social and cultural concepts. According to Judith Butler, persons in the society are not defined by their biological gender but according to their 'performance' within the culture. She says that motherhood is also performative as it emphasizes what mothers self- consciously do rather than what they are biologically/ naturally. Biological fact is not the only real experience of motherhood. She can also be an adoptive mother, lesbian mother or mothers of different sexual orientation. Thus, the above discussion aims at delineating what it is to be a mother. "In this relationship of care, the child has physical, emotional and moral claims on the mother"[20] and therefore she also acts as a role model, guide, moral teacher and educator contributing to the cognitive and intellectual development of her children.

Motherhood in Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises* (2000)

For women living in contemporary India, it is almost impossible to miss the absolute contradiction between the glorification of the female deities and the scant respect given to real women. In India, mother goddesses are seen as the epitome of power, strength and divinity but the cases of sexual, physical and emotional violence against women, "provide ample proof that the violence to which urban women are subjected persists in an absolute contradictory relationship to the deification of mother-goddesses in temples and places of worship."[21] There are several studies that explore the portrayal of motherhood in contemporary Indian English fiction. As Lisa Lau observes: "Writers (such as Anjana Appachana, Meira Chand, Shashi Deshpande, Jaishree Misra, Punyakante Wijenaike, and many others) have portrayed the commonly held South Asian belief that wifehood is imperative for women, widowhood and spinsterhood being the most inauspicious and dreaded of fates, and motherhood, the highest aim and foremost of duties."[22]

Misra, in her debut novel *Ancient Promises* (2000), has explored the construction of motherhood in a very rich and critical way. The mother in the story is an embodiment of empathy, love, kindness, but she does not believe in suffering silently. She has the ability to not only fight for her own rights but for her daughter as well. She is a kind of mother which Maithreyi Krishnaraj explains in the following words:

> Coming to contemporary times, in Indian English Literature, mothers are not the self-sacrificing angels but are made of flesh and blood; beings who face contradictory pulls.

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[20] Arendell, 'Conceiving and Investigating Motherhood: The Decade's Scholarship', p. 1194.

[21] Anu Aneja and Shubhangi Vaidya, *Embodying Motherhood: Perspectives from Contemporary India* (New Delhi: SAGE), p. 27.

[22] Lisa Lau, *Women's Voices: The Presentation of Women in the Contemporary Fiction of South Asian Women* (University of Durham, PhD thesis, 2002), p. 82.

Caught between rejecting the life-giving power that motherhood gives her, and seeking an identity beyond the halo of motherhood, the modern woman finds no viable alternative.[23]

Ancient Promises is a semi-autobiographical novel where Misra shares her own first-hand experience as a mother of a specially-abled girl child. The novel navigates the tensions and joys of the beautiful relationship between Janu (as a mother figure) and Riya (her intellectually-disabled daughter). We selected this particular novel by Misra because it is popularly-known, widely read and well-represented. Because it is semi-autobiographical, it well-represents the hardships Misra faced for being a mother of a specially-abled child when her marital life was already in dark. *Ancient Promises* is the fictionalized form of the story Misra shares in the following words:

Motherhood came early in my own life, following an arranged marriage while I was still in my teens. I was too young and too confused to cope at all well with cloth diapers and colic and swiftly turned into one of those anxious young mums my heart now goes out to. I'd had my child at the wrong time and for all the wrong reasons and when, a few months later, it also emerged that she was mentally challenged, I thought, aged twenty-three, that life had ended. But I grew to love my daughter with fierce protectiveness…. Essentially, she freed me from society's expectations- a test which I had already failed anyway by having her at all- and so I got divorce, rediscovered my first love, moved to England, became both a working woman and a novelist, and embraced life in all its fullness. Paradoxically, it would seem, motherhood became the driving force in my liberation as a woman.[24]

As is often the case, when mothers are ready to follow the traditional gender roles by sacrificing their personal choices and lives, they are considered as 'good' mothers. Because of their adherence to traditional gender roles, they are recognized as caring and loving in contrast to the women who simply are not conventional mothers.

The novel begins with a sentence carrying a social stigma worse perhaps than widowhood: "My marriage ended today."[25] Janaki (Janu) is trapped in an unhappy, meaningless, suffocating and empty marriage. Married at an early age of eighteen, she is under immense pressure to adhere to the conventional gender norms set by Indian society. In the very first few scenes of the novel, the detailed account of her desperate attempts to receive the attention of her husband and win the favours of the family results in her silent suffering. Janu, a Keralite from Delhi, while studying, is forced to marry Suresh, a boy from "a highly respected family" having "a beautiful house and a fleet of Ambassador cars."[26] The Maraar family, desiring a pretty girl to marry their younger son Suresh, never accepts Janu as one of their own. In great need of love and attention, Janu decides that having a child would help her in securing a place in everyone's heart. She wonders:

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[23] Maithreyi Krishnaraj, *Motherhood in India: Glorification without Empowerment?* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2010), p. 5.
[24] Misra, *Of Mothers and Others: Stories, Essays, Poems*, p. XV.
[25] Jaishree Misra, *Ancient Promises* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 3.
[26] Misra, *Ancient Promises*, p. 53.

> Perhaps, just perhaps, having a child would solve my problems more easily than a BA and a job. That's what I'd do, I'd have a *child*! .... Especially if she turned out to be the much-longed-for first *grandson.* And, as his mother, I'd receive a sort of instant double-promotion, so to speak. Be elevated to the position of Good Mother and Good Daughter-in-Law.[27]

Janu ponders that the companionship she is longing for might develop between her and Suresh once he becomes a father. She questions herself: "Would fatherhood change that? Make him *want* to spend more time with me, perhaps."[28] Sadly, the idea of motherhood being a boon turns out to be a nightmare for her. She delivers a girl who is "*definitely* mentally handicapped," says "the-famous-paediatrician-Dr Vijaya."[29] There begins the psychological and emotional conflict as everyone tried to fit into the mold every way possible, not only Janu this time, but also her daughter Riya. Sadly true, women are inextricably linked to any condition or disability with children. They are blamed and seen as faulty for lacking the natural capacity of love and care. The cultural understanding of 'good' and 'bad' mothers "across the world are made to feel responsible for their children's disability in specific, gendered ways."[30] As Shubhangi Vaidya quotes Anita Ghai and herself asserts: "The arrival of a disabled child in the family may be regarded as a 'fate worse than death', more so if the child is a girl, and the acquisition of a disability by a 'non disabled' person is viewed as a personal tragedy, probably the result of sins committed in lives past or present."[31] Suresh, the father of the newborn was of the similar mindset who kept himself busy with the business trips, making his presence meaningless both in the lives of her wife and daughter. As Janu remarks: "Suresh was an occasional visitor to this busy life. By now his presence or absence had become truly irrelevant."[32] Janu, a fighter by nature, tries to give her child as normal a life as possible but no-one in the family apart for her accepted this child. Riya is expected to suffer in silence, similar to how Janu had learnt to hide her agony in the unhappy and empty marriage.

However, things were different this time, Janu refrains from suffering mutely and making her daughter to live life by somebody else's rules. She refused to cage her daughter inside the four walls and decides to take up the roles of both mother and father. She says: "I was fairly sure by now that the unhappiness of my marriage would also not change if I had a normal child."[33] Janu identifies first and most strongly with her daughter, and she wanted to experience what she went through in her life. As Nancy Chodorow in her seminal book *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* aptly remarks: "…the mother senses a double identification with her own mother and herself through the child as she can relate to the daughter

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[27] Misra, *Ancient Promises*, p. 113.

[28] Misra, *Ancient Promises*, p. 114.

[29] Misra, *Ancient Promises*, p. 127.

[30] Aneja and Vaidya, *Embodying Motherhood: Perspectives from Contemporary India*, p. 108.

[31] Aneja and Vaidya, *Embodying Motherhood: Perspectives from Contemporary India*, p. 158.

[32] Misra, *Ancient Promises*, pp. 149-150.

[33] Misra, *Ancient Promises*, p. 148.

as an extension of herself."[34] Initially Janu is more or less like her mother, ready to conform to the will of others. She hesitated in going against the grain and asserting her autonomy. This is one of the common problems Marianne Hirsch analyzes stating that it is "because of maternal dominance in early childhood, and mother's closer identification with daughters than with sons, women acquired a characteristically feminine, affiliative, and relational sense of self."[34]

After facing difficult situations and experiences, Janu becomes a true representation of the "new woman"[6] of the twenty-first century as she starts refusing social norms and recognizing her true self. Even though Janu inherits her mother's "good-enough mothering,"[35] her intentions are always questioned and doubted by her in-laws when it comes to Riya. Determined to give her daughter and herself a better life, Janu thinks of going to America where she could get help for Riya from specialists and begin a new life. She believes that she has been given the responsibility of Riya out of some 'ancient promises' she must have made to her in her past life. Janu explains:

> Somewhere in my distant past, perhaps even a thousand years ago, I'd done something that committed me to dedicating my life to Riya's care. Had I been a thirsty traveler at her door and had she taken me in, washed my feet, fed and watered me? I would never know what ancient promise I had made to her, just as she would never know what deed had robbed her of words in this life. Or how that would be compensated for in the next. But, somewhere along the way, we had both lived many lives that linked us together now.[36]

Fortunately, things became much easier when Janu accidently meets her teenage-love Arjun and the love between them grew again. This time Janu knows that she cannot afford to lose him and therefore she gets into the "University of *London* instead of Arizona!" to reunite with him.[37] Later, Janu decides to part ways from her husband by getting a divorce. As is always the case, divorce in Indian society is often seen as a stigma or a blot on a woman's character and therefore it was not easy or acceptable for Janu as well. She realizes that this was the result of her inaction as she says: "That was probably it, all these years I had silently borne an unhappy marriage…."[38] As a result, she decides to get a divorce from Suresh and have custody of her daughter. Immediately, the true nature of Suresh is revealed when he makes a claim on Riya. Full of malice, he says to Janu: "You can go where you like. Live with whichever men you want. But you are not taking my daughter with you. To be brought up by strange men. How many, God knows."[39] Janu very well understands his intention and not wishing to create any further problems calmly answers: "She's not going to be brought up by different men, Suresh, she'll always be brought up by me."[39] Her patience, calmness and empathy are misunderstood by Suresh as weakness, and he becomes aggressive replying "You?! You are going to bring up my daughter? You, who can't resist selling her body

[34]R. Geetha and K. Radah, "Construction of Female Selfhood and Self-Identity in Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises*," *Singaporean Journal of Scientific Research*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2020), p.52.

[35] Misra, *Ancient Promises*, p. 33.

[36] Misra, *Ancient Promises*, p. 160.

[37] Misra, *Ancient Promises*, p. 195.

[38] Misra, *Ancient Promises*, p. 221.

[39] Misra, *Ancient Promises*, p. 254.

to strange men!"[39] The sudden change in personality and attitude of Suresh made Janu understand that splitting up with her husband was necessary as the marriage was destroyed beyond repair.

As a result, Janu ameliorated her life not only by completing her education and living a respectful and loving life with her love Arjun but also by rewarding her daughter with special care, love, and attention. At the end of the novel, Janu affirms that though for the rest of the world she would be seen as the saviour of her specially-abled child but for her, Riya is the one who gave her the courage to fight for her own identity and happiness. She concludes by saying:

> As Arjun had once pointed out, I might have never left Suresh at all if Riya had *not* had a learning disability. An unhappy marriage (or a *slightly* unhappy marriage as my mother had grudgingly conceded once) would have been a price worth paying for my own daughter to have had good marriage prospects … And so, women hung on in unhappy marriages to be able to give their daughters away respectably 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. Riya's disability had been the blessing to free me from that circle of forced happiness. I wouldn't have to condemn generations after me to enter that spiraling cycle that just went on and on and on. Rewriting old stories so painfully over and over again.[40]

Despite the fact that in the eyes of many people she will now be a divorcée with a mentally handicapped daughter, but she knew that these people do not have any idea of the "kind of past that [she] hoped [she] had just finished paying for."[41] In *Ancient Promises*, Misra has left no stones unturned in depicting the true mother-daughter relationship.

Conclusion

This literary work is not merely a story but a reflection on how the women and children in Indian society are treated. Jaishree Misra's excellent novel on the relationship between mother and daughter is an experience many readers will identify with. Towards the end of this thought-provoking book Misra confesses that the novel is semi-autobiographical. She declares at the end of the novel: "I do have a Riya, with a learning disability, and as dear to me as Riya is to her mother in the book."[42] The fact that she was already the mother of a disabled child and the societal tag of a 'bad' mother, she challenged the patriarchal construct of the selfless sacrificing mother and gave emphasis to her own professional career which in return helped her to understand Riya better and her experience as Riya's mother helped her in performing her duty in a better way. Her real-life experience, depicted through her semi-autobiographical text, is synonymous with the socio-cultural representations of empty marriage and child disability in which the blame is always put on the women in a patriarchal Indian society. The representation of motherhood in Misra's semi-

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[40] Misra, *Ancient Promises*, p. 303.
[41] Misra, *Ancient Promises*, p. 304.
[42] Misra, *Ancient Promises*, p. 307.

autobiographical discourse are characterized by the construction of her selfhood and distancing herself from stereotypical representations at all levels in Indian society. Therefore, motherhood is an actual contribution to the society as by performing the roles of bearing children and the responsibility of raising them properly, mothers should be seen as the most effective engine in nation-formation. As the Indian actress Shabana Azmi very aptly suggests: "Taking care of our women and children builds not just a generation but the nation itself. We neglect mothers at our own peril, at the peril of society. If we are to lead as a nation, we must put our women and children first."[43] Significantly, the formation of a nation is done only when we stand together and accept the fact that in the process each of us counts.

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[43] Misra, *Of Mothers and Others: Stories, Essays, Poems*, p. xi.