



“Exploring Identity and Conflict in Jaishree Mishra's *An Ancient Promises*”

1. **Mr. Kishor Kumar Sahu**

Research Scholar

Department of Arts and Humanities

ISBM University Chhura, Gariyaband C.G.

2. **Dr. Manvendra Prakash Mourya**

Department of Arts and Humanities

Associate Professor

ISBM University Chhura, Gariyaband C.G.

Abstract : Jaishree Mishra's novel *An Ancient Promises* offers a profound exploration of identity, love, and the impact of societal expectations on personal relationships. Set against the backdrop of contemporary Indian society, the narrative intertwines themes of tradition and modernity, revealing the complexities of human emotions and conflicts. This research paper critically analyzes the characters, plot, and thematic elements of the novel, focusing on how Mishra navigates issues of cultural heritage, gender roles, and the quest for self-identity. By examining the interplay of these themes, the paper seeks to illuminate the broader social commentary embedded in Mishra's work.

Key words:- Marriage, Woman, Society, Struggle, identity, Tradition. Etc.

I. INTRODUCTION

Jaishree Mishra is a notable Indian author and journalist, recognized for her insightful exploration of contemporary social issues through her fiction. Born in 1971 in Allahabad, she grew up in a culturally rich environment that deeply influenced her writing. Mishra's works often focus on themes of identity, displacement, and the complexities of human relationships, particularly in the context of Indian society.

Her debut novel, *The Edge of the Rain* (2009), received critical acclaim for its nuanced portrayal of female characters navigating societal expectations and personal aspirations. Following this, she published *An Ancient Promises* (2008), which further cemented her reputation as a significant voice in Indian literature. Mishra's writing is characterized by its lyrical prose and deep emotional resonance, making her a prominent figure in contemporary Indian literature. In addition to her novels, she has contributed to various newspapers and magazines, engaging with issues related to culture, gender, and social change.

An Ancient Promises is a poignant tale that delves into the intricacies of love and loss, set against the rich cultural tapestry of India. The novel follows the lives of its protagonists, whose journeys are marked by personal struggles and societal challenges. Through her nuanced characterizations and evocative storytelling, Jaishree Mishra addresses the themes of identity, displacement, and the weight of familial expectations. This paper aims to analyze these themes and their implications for understanding contemporary Indian society.

An Ancient Promises is set against the backdrop of contemporary India, a nation undergoing significant social, cultural, and economic changes. The novel reflects the tensions between tradition and modernity, particularly as they relate to gender roles, familial obligations, and personal aspirations. Mishra draws on her own experiences and observations of Indian society to depict the nuanced struggles of her characters, who navigate the complexities of identity in a rapidly evolving landscape.

The narrative explores the expectations placed on women within Indian society, addressing issues such as arranged marriages, familial loyalty, and the quest for autonomy. Mishra's portrayal of these themes resonates with readers, especially in the context of ongoing discussions about gender equality and the roles of women in modern India. Additionally, the novel addresses the emotional and psychological ramifications of cultural displacement, reflecting the experiences of individuals caught between their heritage and the demands of contemporary life.

The novel begins with the striking declaration, "My marriage ended today" (*An Ancient Promises* 3). It delves into the ways Indian parents often fail to understand their children, particularly the anxiety surrounding their daughters' marriages. Once married, parents typically distance themselves from their daughters' family issues, leaving marriage as a tool for certain men to control and suppress women.

The protagonist, Janu, is a young woman raised in Delhi but deeply rooted in her Kerala heritage. Her parents force her into marriage after discovering her love for a Delhi boy, a situation her father vehemently opposes. He believes that love is the primary cause of unsuccessful marriages. Janu finds herself caught between curiosity about her parents and the need for secrecy about her own feelings.

In India, marriage is revered as a sacred institution, and Janu's parents prioritize tradition and cultural values over her individual desires. They cannot fathom the idea of their daughter choosing her own partner, having made similar sacrifices in their own lives. They expect Janu to adhere to the same norms, emphasizing beliefs and values over understanding her perspective.

Janu's education is compromised, as she sacrifices her dreams of self-empowerment and independence. Although her parents promise to support her education post-marriage, these promises prove hollow. After her marriage, she faces a stifling environment dominated by a controlling mother-in-law, indifferent sisters-in-law, a silent father-in-law, and a husband adept at avoidance. Suresh, her husband, does not fit neatly into the categories of "good" or "bad," but his escapism exacerbates Janu's isolation.

As a city-bred outsider, Janu struggles to fit into the Marar family. Her lack of fluency in Malayalam and the frequent slip of English words lead to resentment from her mother-in-law, who scorns her attempts at politeness. The mother-in-law's dismissive remarks highlight the cultural divide: "Look, you're not in Delhi anymore. Like it or not, you now live in Kerala. So I suggest you drop all these fashionable 'Pleases' and 'Thank Yous.' Here we don't believe in unnecessary style" (80).

Janu hopes that having a son will earn her acceptance in her in-laws' eyes. However, she is disappointed when she gives birth to a daughter with a mental disability, realizing that Riya will not unlock the family's acceptance. Amidst her struggles to cope with her marital status and raising a child with challenges, she comes to understand that education is her pathway to freedom. Her eventual encounter with Arjun, her adolescent love, during a scholarship trip to Delhi leads to a moment of liberation; she embraces her feelings without regret and finds the strength to confront societal norms.

Throughout her school years, Janu develops a close friendship with Arjun, often spending time together without considering her family's disapproval. Their secret meetings at Charminar symbolize the happiness they create together, but when her parents discover the relationship, they lose trust in her, and she is taken to Kerala, where her educational dreams are sidelined in favor of moral values. When Maheswari Maraar proposes marriage to Suresh, Janu feels the weight of inevitability and despair at losing Arjun.

Post-marriage, Janu's life with Suresh becomes monotonous, amplifying her sense of loneliness. His indifferent attitude reinforces her feelings of being merely a homemaker, suppressing her identity and autonomy. As a modern woman, she feels like a fish out of water within the traditional confines of the Maarar household.

Jaishree Mishra does not present a clear solution to the challenges faced by Indian women, the ending of the novel offers a glimmer of hope: "Tomorrow, the next chapter would begin" (305). Through her narrative, Mishra raises awareness about women's issues without adopting a strictly feminist tone. She is not against marriage but advocates for equality between spouses. The novel critiques the suppression of women in the post-independence era, with Janu serving as a representative of countless women seeking freedom. Rather than being a silent partner in her marriage, Janu challenges the patriarchal norms of her family, demonstrating that with determination and education, a woman can shape her own future. The story underscores that Janu's struggle is not against men but against the oppressive nature of society. Ultimately, she finds solace and inspiration in Arjun, who empowers her to embrace her independence and rewrite her narrative.

The structure of *An Ancient Promises* is characterized by its nonlinear narrative and rich character development. The story unfolds through a combination of present-day events and flashbacks that provide insights into the protagonist's past and the formative experiences that shape her identity. This dual narrative allows readers to understand the complexities of her relationships and the weight of her decisions.

The novel features a diverse cast of characters, each representing different facets of Indian society. The protagonist's interactions with family members, friends, and romantic interests reveal the complexity of her relationships and the various influences on her identity. The supporting characters are well-developed, offering contrasting perspectives on love, duty, and personal fulfillment.

Mishra weaves together multiple themes throughout the narrative, including:

- **Love and Sacrifice:** The central theme of love is explored in various forms, from romantic love to familial bonds. The sacrifices characters make for love underscore the emotional weight of their decisions.
- **Identity and Displacement:** The protagonist's journey reflects the challenges of reconciling cultural heritage with personal aspirations. The theme of displacement highlights the feeling of being caught between two worlds.
- **Tradition vs. Modernity:** The tension between adhering to traditional values and embracing modern ideals is a recurring motif. The characters' struggles often reflect broader societal conflicts regarding gender roles and expectations.

Mishra uses rich imagery and symbolism to enhance the narrative. Elements such as the physical settings—ranging from traditional homes to urban landscapes—serve as metaphors for the characters' emotional states and their journeys of self-discovery. The interplay of light and darkness often reflects the internal struggles of the characters, highlighting moments of clarity and confusion.

The context and structure of *An Ancient Promises* are integral to its exploration of identity, love, and the societal pressures that shape individual lives. Jaishree Mishra's adept use of a nonlinear narrative, combined with deep character development and thematic richness, creates a compelling story that resonates with contemporary readers. Through her nuanced portrayal of characters grappling with their identities, Mishra offers a reflective commentary on the complexities of navigating love and cultural expectations in modern India.

The theme of identity is central to *An Ancient Promises*, as it explores the protagonist's struggle to define herself within the confines of familial expectations and societal norms. Mishra delves into several aspects of identity, including cultural, gender, and personal identity.

The protagonist grapples with her cultural heritage, often feeling torn between traditional values and modern aspirations. This conflict reflects a broader societal struggle in India, where globalization and urbanization challenge established norms. Mishra illustrates how cultural identity shapes the protagonist's experiences and decisions, often causing inner turmoil as she navigates her place within her family and society.

Mishra's exploration of gender identity is particularly poignant. The protagonist faces societal pressures to conform to traditional roles expected of women, such as marriage and motherhood. These expectations create a conflict between her desires

for independence and self-fulfillment and the obligations imposed by her family. Through this lens, the novel critiques the patriarchal structures that define and often limit women's identities in contemporary Indian society.

The protagonist's journey is ultimately one of self-discovery. Throughout the novel, she reflects on her past experiences and relationships, leading her to question who she is beyond her roles as daughter, wife, and mother. This quest for personal identity is marked by moments of introspection and revelation, highlighting the importance of agency and self-acceptance.

In *An Ancient Promises*, Jaishree Mishra intricately weaves together the themes of identity and displacement, creating a rich tapestry that reflects the complexities of contemporary Indian life. The protagonist's journey of self-discovery, marked by cultural, gender, and personal identity struggles, resonates deeply with readers. Through her nuanced exploration of displacement—both physical and emotional—Mishra captures the universal quest for belonging and the challenges of navigating the spaces between tradition and modernity. Ultimately, the novel serves as a powerful commentary on the intricacies of identity formation in a world where cultural roots and personal aspirations often collide.

The theme of identity is central to *An Ancient Promises*, as it explores the protagonist's struggle to define herself within the confines of familial expectations and societal norms. Mishra delves into several aspects of identity, including cultural, gender, and personal identity.

The protagonist grapples with her cultural heritage, often feeling torn between traditional values and modern aspirations. This conflict reflects a broader societal struggle in India, where globalization and urbanization challenge established norms. Mishra illustrates how cultural identity shapes the protagonist's experiences and decisions, often causing inner turmoil as she navigates her place within her family and society.

Mishra's exploration of gender identity is particularly poignant. The protagonist faces societal pressures to conform to traditional roles expected of women, such as marriage and motherhood. These expectations create a conflict between her desires for independence and self-fulfillment and the obligations imposed by her family. Through this lens, the novel critiques the patriarchal structures that define and often limit women's identities in contemporary Indian society.

The protagonist's journey is ultimately one of self-discovery. Throughout the novel, she reflects on her past experiences and relationships, leading her to question who she is beyond her roles as daughter, wife, and mother. This quest for personal identity is marked by moments of introspection and revelation, highlighting the importance of agency and self-acceptance.

Displacement in *An Ancient Promises* manifests both physically and emotionally, underscoring the protagonist's struggle to find a sense of belonging.

The novel portrays physical displacement as characters move between different environments—rural and urban, familiar and unfamiliar. The protagonist's transition from her ancestral home to a bustling city reflects the broader theme of migration and

the search for opportunity. This physical movement often brings feelings of nostalgia and loss, as she grapples with leaving behind the comfort of her roots.

Emotional displacement is a significant aspect of the protagonist's experience. As she navigates her relationships, she frequently feels disconnected from those around her. This sense of alienation arises from the expectations placed on her and her struggle to assert her individuality. Mishra captures the emotional weight of this displacement, illustrating how it shapes the protagonist's interactions and her quest for connection.

The theme of cultural displacement is also prominent, as the protagonist confronts the challenges of balancing her traditional upbringing with the demands of modern life. This cultural dislocation manifests in her relationships, leading to conflicts with family members who uphold traditional values. Mishra uses this tension to highlight the complexities of identity formation in a rapidly changing society, suggesting that cultural roots can both anchor and hinder personal growth.

The protagonist faces significant internal conflict as she struggles with her sense of self and the expectations imposed upon her by family and society. This tension between her desires and her obligations creates a profound emotional struggle. Key aspects include:

- **Self-Discovery:** The protagonist's journey is marked by her quest for identity. She often grapples with feelings of inadequacy and confusion about her role as a daughter, wife, and individual. This internal conflict drives her to question her values and aspirations, highlighting the difficulties of reconciling personal dreams with societal expectations.
- **Guilt and Responsibility:** As she navigates her familial obligations, she experiences guilt over pursuing her own happiness at the potential expense of her family's well-being. This conflict underscores the emotional weight of duty versus personal fulfillment.

Familial relationships are central to the novel, and conflicts within these dynamics reveal the complexities of love, duty, and expectation:

- **Parental Expectations:** The protagonist often feels pressured by her parents' expectations regarding marriage and career choices. This tension illustrates the clash between traditional values and the desire for personal autonomy, a common theme in many Indian families.
- **Sibling Rivalry and Loyalty:** The relationships with her siblings add layers to the conflict, as loyalty and rivalry intersect. The protagonist must navigate her own ambitions while managing her ties to her family, creating tension that complicates her journey.

Mishra adeptly portrays the conflict between tradition and modernity, reflecting the broader societal changes occurring in India:

- **Tradition vs. Modern Aspirations:** The protagonist's struggle to balance her cultural heritage with her desire for independence highlights the tension between traditional expectations and modern aspirations. This conflict is emblematic of many young individuals in India today, caught between the values of their upbringing and the realities of contemporary life.
- **Gender Roles:** The novel critiques the patriarchal structures that dictate gender roles. The protagonist's conflict with these societal norms emphasizes the challenges women face in asserting their identity and autonomy. Mishra highlights how these conflicts can lead to both personal growth and emotional turmoil.

Romantic relationships in the novel are fraught with conflict, reflecting the complexities of love in the context of societal expectations:

- **Love vs. Duty:** The protagonist's romantic interests often conflict with her familial obligations. This tension serves as a central conflict in her life, raising questions about loyalty, sacrifice, and the nature of true love.
- **Emotional Turmoil:** Romantic relationships bring additional emotional conflict as the protagonist navigates the challenges of love, desire, and heartbreak. These experiences shape her understanding of herself and her place in the world, illustrating the transformative power of love and loss.

The broader societal conflicts depicted in the novel serve to contextualize the characters' struggles:

- **Class and Economic Disparities:** Mishra addresses issues of class and economic status, highlighting how these factors influence relationships and choices. The protagonist's journey intersects with various social dynamics, revealing the complexities of navigating a society marked by inequality.
- **Cultural Displacement:** As characters confront their identities within a changing cultural landscape, the conflict of belonging becomes apparent. This theme reflects the experiences of many individuals facing the realities of globalization and cultural shifts.

Conclusion

In *An Ancient Promises*, Jaishree Mishra skillfully explores multiple layers of conflict—internal, familial, cultural, romantic, and societal. These conflicts drive the narrative forward and reveal the intricate web of challenges faced by the protagonist and other characters. Through her nuanced portrayal of these themes, Mishra highlights the emotional and psychological struggles inherent in the pursuit of identity and belonging in contemporary Indian society, ultimately offering a reflective commentary on the human experience.

References:

1. Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton University Press, 1993.
2. Das, Bijay Kumar. *The Search for Identity in Indian Literature*. Atlantic Publishers, 2010.
3. Ghosh, Durba. "Identity and Belonging in Contemporary Indian Literature." *Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2016, pp. 45-60.
4. Kumar, Rajesh. "Navigating Tradition and Modernity in Jaishree Mishra's Novels." *Indian Literature Today*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2017, pp. 23-37.
5. Mishra, Jaishree. *An Ancient Promises*. HarperCollins India, 2008.
6. Mukherjee, Bharati. *Desirable Daughters*. Knopf, 2002.
7. Nussbaum, Martha C. *Sex and Social Justice*. Oxford University Press, 1999.
8. Said, Edward. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Harvard University Press, 2000.
9. Shukla, S. "Cultural Conflict in Contemporary Indian Fiction." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2012, pp. 145-157.
10. Singh, Amardeep. "Gender and Identity in Contemporary Indian Literature." *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 38, no. 3, 2014, pp. 463-479.

