

Radical Feminist Reading of Marriage in Jaishree Misra's Ancient Promises

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Abstract: Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises* offers a powerful critique of marriage as a patriarchal institution that regulates female identity, desire, and autonomy through emotional control rather than overt physical violence. This article examines the novel through the lens of Radical Feminism, arguing that Janaki's marriage to Suresh Maraar functions as a site of psychological oppression, domestic alienation, and systematic erasure of individuality. While marriage is traditionally celebrated within Indian society as a sacred and stabilising institution, Misra exposes the hidden structures of power that transform women into instruments of obedience, sacrifice, and emotional labour. Drawing upon the theoretical perspectives of Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Shulamith Firestone, Adrienne Rich, Betty Friedan, and bell hooks, the study analyses how patriarchal authority operates through arranged marriage, emotional neglect, reproductive expectations, social conditioning, and moral surveillance. The article argues that Janaki's suffering is not the consequence of individual incompatibility alone but emerges from a larger ideological system that privileges male authority and female submission. The Maraar household becomes a symbolic representation of domestic patriarchy where silence is rewarded, conformity is expected, and female aspiration is perceived as a threat to established hierarchies. The study further explores Janaki's gradual resistance through education, intellectual awakening, emotional self-recognition, and her eventual refusal to remain within an oppressive marital structure. Her pursuit of higher education, rejection of emotional subjugation, and demand for divorce are interpreted as acts of radical feminist agency that challenge conventional assumptions regarding marriage, motherhood, and feminine duty. The article contends that *Ancient Promises* dismantles the romantic mythology surrounding marriage and redefines liberation as the recovery of selfhood through knowledge, autonomy, and resistance. By foregrounding emotional violence and psychological domination as forms of patriarchal control, the article contributes to contemporary feminist discussions concerning marriage, gendered power relations, and women's agency within Indian society. It concludes that Janaki's journey from submission to self-definition represents a radical feminist assertion of dignity against structures designed to silence, discipline, and contain women.

Index Terms - Jaishree Misra; *Ancient Promises*; Radical Feminism; Patriarchy; Marriage; Emotional Violence; Psychological Oppression; Female Agency; Resistance; Selfhood; Divorce; Indian English Fiction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Marriage occupies a central position within Indian social and cultural life. It is frequently represented as a sacred institution that provides emotional security, social legitimacy, and familial continuity. Religious traditions, cultural practices, and social narratives collectively reinforce the belief that marriage represents one of the most significant milestones in a woman's life. Within this framework, women are often encouraged to perceive marriage not merely as a personal choice but as a moral obligation and a marker of social respectability. The idealisation of marriage has consequently become deeply embedded within the collective imagination, shaping expectations regarding femininity, duty, and personal fulfilment.

Yet feminist scholarship has repeatedly questioned the assumptions underlying this idealised vision. Feminist theorists argue that marriage frequently functions as a mechanism through which patriarchal societies regulate women's sexuality, labour, mobility, and aspirations. While marriage may offer companionship and stability, it can also reinforce unequal power relations that privilege male authority and female dependence. The institution therefore occupies a contested position within feminist discourse because it simultaneously promises protection and reproduces structures of control.

Indian women writers have played a crucial role in exposing these contradictions. Through fiction, they have explored the emotional and psychological consequences of gendered expectations that shape women's experiences within marriage and family life. Writers such as Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Anita Nair, and Jaishree Misra have consistently highlighted the tensions between personal desire and social obligation, revealing how patriarchal structures often transform intimate relationships into sites of conflict, negotiation, and resistance.

Among these writers, Jaishree Misra occupies a distinctive position because of her ability to portray the emotional realities of women trapped within restrictive social environments. Her fiction frequently focuses on characters who struggle to reconcile individual aspirations with cultural expectations. Rather than depicting patriarchy solely through visible acts of domination, Misra

exposes its operation through everyday interactions, emotional silences, domestic routines, and subtle forms of psychological control. Her narratives reveal that oppression often functions most effectively when it appears ordinary and socially acceptable.

Published in 2000, *Ancient Promises* remains one of Misra's most significant novels. The narrative follows Janaki, commonly known as Janu, as she navigates the complex realities of love, marriage, motherhood, and self-discovery. Initially presented as a story of failed romance and marital disappointment, the novel gradually evolves into a profound exploration of female identity and resistance. Janaki's arranged marriage to Suresh Maraar places her within a domestic environment characterised by emotional neglect, social conformity, and constant surveillance. The Maraar household expects obedience, endurance, and self-sacrifice, leaving little space for individuality or personal fulfilment.

What makes the novel particularly compelling is its portrayal of emotional violence. Unlike many narratives that focus on physical abuse, *Ancient Promises* examines forms of suffering that remain largely invisible. Janaki is not subjected to overt brutality. Instead, she experiences emotional abandonment, psychological isolation, and the gradual erosion of self-worth. Her desires are dismissed, her aspirations minimised, and her individuality absorbed into the expectations of family and society. Misra demonstrates that emotional violence can be equally destructive because it undermines a person's sense of identity while leaving no visible evidence of harm.

The novel acquires additional significance when examined through the framework of Radical Feminism. Radical feminist theory identifies patriarchy as a system of power embedded within social institutions such as marriage, family, religion, and heterosexual relationships. Rather than viewing women's oppression as an accidental consequence of individual behaviour, radical feminists argue that inequality is structurally produced and maintained through cultural norms, ideological conditioning, and institutional practices. This perspective provides a particularly useful lens for understanding Janaki's experiences because her suffering originates not from a single individual but from a social system that normalises female sacrifice and emotional labour.

A radical feminist reading reveals that Janaki's marriage functions as a political institution rather than a purely personal relationship. The expectations imposed upon her concerning obedience, motherhood, sexuality, and domestic service reflect broader patriarchal values that define women primarily through their usefulness to others. Her gradual resistance therefore carries political significance because it challenges assumptions that have long governed female behaviour.

This article examines *Ancient Promises* as a radical feminist critique of marriage and domestic patriarchy. It argues that the novel dismantles the romantic mythology surrounding marriage by exposing its role in regulating female identity and sustaining unequal power relations. Drawing upon the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Shulamith Firestone, Adrienne Rich, Betty Friedan, and bell hooks, the study explores how emotional violence, reproductive expectations, and social conditioning operate within the narrative. It further analyses Janaki's journey towards selfhood, demonstrating how education, self-awareness, and resistance enable her to reclaim agency within a system designed to deny it.

Ultimately, the article contends that *Ancient Promises* transforms the story of one woman's unhappy marriage into a broader feminist critique of institutions that demand female obedience while denying women emotional fulfilment and personal autonomy. Through Janaki's journey, Misra challenges readers to reconsider the cultural assumptions surrounding marriage and to recognise the importance of selfhood, dignity, and resistance in women's struggles for liberation.

2. Review of Existing Studies

Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises* has attracted considerable scholarly attention since its publication because of its nuanced portrayal of women's emotional lives within patriarchal social structures. Critics have generally approached the novel as a narrative of female suffering, marital dissatisfaction, self-discovery, and resistance against oppressive social expectations. Through its depiction of Janaki's journey from youthful idealism to emotional disillusionment and eventual self-assertion, the novel has established itself as an important contribution to contemporary Indian English women's writing. However, despite the growing body of criticism surrounding the text, several dimensions of its feminist significance remain insufficiently explored, particularly its engagement with emotional violence, domestic patriarchy, and the political nature of marriage.

A substantial body of scholarship examines *Ancient Promises* as a critique of arranged marriage and patriarchal domesticity. Researchers have frequently argued that Janaki's marriage to Suresh Maraar symbolises the broader social structures that restrict women's autonomy and subordinate their desires to family interests. These studies emphasise how marriage functions as a mechanism through which patriarchal authority is reproduced across generations. Critics observe that Janaki's aspirations, emotional needs, and educational ambitions are consistently subordinated to social expectations that privilege family honour and cultural conformity over individual fulfilment. Such interpretations have helped establish the novel as a significant feminist intervention within Indian English fiction.

Another major area of scholarly discussion concerns female identity and selfhood. Several critics focus on Janaki's gradual transformation from a passive and compliant young woman into an individual capable of independent thought and decision-making.

These studies often place *Ancient Promises* alongside works by Indian women novelists such as Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Anita Nair, and Bharati Mukherjee, whose fiction similarly examines women's struggles against restrictive gender norms. Within this framework, Janaki's journey is interpreted as a process of self-discovery in which she learns to challenge the expectations imposed upon her by family and society. Such readings emphasise personal growth and psychological development while highlighting the importance of agency within oppressive social environments.

Motherhood has also received significant critical attention. Scholars examining this aspect of the novel frequently focus on Janaki's relationship with her daughter Riya and the emotional challenges associated with raising a child with developmental disabilities. Many studies interpret motherhood as a source of resilience and emotional strength that contributes to Janaki's eventual transformation. Critics have observed that maternal responsibility becomes an important factor motivating her pursuit of education and independence. While these discussions offer valuable insights into the emotional dimensions of the novel, they often treat motherhood primarily as a personal experience rather than as a site of political and ideological control.

Several researchers have explored the role of education in Janaki's journey towards independence. These studies generally recognise learning as an important factor contributing to her empowerment and self-confidence. Janaki's decision to continue her studies despite domestic responsibilities is frequently interpreted as an act of resistance against patriarchal limitations. However, most analyses discuss education as one element within a broader narrative of self-development rather than examining it as a direct challenge to patriarchal authority. Consequently, the relationship between knowledge, autonomy, and resistance remains insufficiently theorised within existing scholarship.

Another significant area of criticism concerns the cultural environment depicted in the novel. Scholars have highlighted the tension between modernity and tradition that shapes Janaki's experiences. Kerala, often celebrated for its literacy rates and educational achievements, appears in the novel as a society that simultaneously maintains conservative attitudes regarding gender roles and female behaviour. Researchers argue that Misra exposes the contradictions inherent within such social contexts, demonstrating that educational progress does not automatically eliminate patriarchal values. These studies contribute to broader discussions concerning gender, culture, and social change within postcolonial India.

Despite these important contributions, relatively few studies have examined *Ancient Promises* through the lens of Radical Feminism. Existing criticism often employs general feminist frameworks that focus on empowerment, identity, and personal growth without fully addressing the structural nature of women's oppression. While scholars acknowledge the difficulties Janaki encounters within marriage, they rarely analyse marriage itself as a political institution designed to sustain patriarchal power. As a result, the ideological dimensions of the novel remain underexplored.

This gap becomes particularly significant when considering the insights offered by radical feminist theory. Radical feminists argue that institutions such as marriage, family, and heterosexual relationships function as mechanisms through which patriarchy reproduces itself. Women's oppression is not viewed as the result of individual prejudice alone but as a consequence of social systems that regulate female sexuality, labour, reproduction, and emotional expression. From this perspective, Janaki's experiences acquire a broader political significance because they reveal how personal suffering is connected to institutional power.

Kate Millett's concept of sexual politics, for example, highlights the ways in which family structures reinforce gender hierarchies by socialising women into subordinate roles. Janaki's experiences within the Maraar household illustrate precisely this process. Her individuality is gradually absorbed into domestic expectations, while obedience and adjustment are presented as feminine virtues. Similarly, Shulamith Firestone's critique of reproductive expectations illuminates the pressures surrounding motherhood within the novel. Janaki's hope that motherhood might improve her position within the family reveals how patriarchal systems often link female value to reproductive function.

The work of Betty Friedan also provides an important perspective largely absent from existing criticism. Friedan's analysis of domestic dissatisfaction demonstrates that emotional fulfilment cannot be achieved when women are denied opportunities for intellectual and personal development. Janaki's growing sense of emptiness closely resembles the condition Friedan describes. Her emotional suffering stems not only from marital neglect but also from the suppression of individuality and ambition.

Adrienne Rich's examination of compulsory heterosexuality further enriches understanding of the novel. Rich argues that women are often conditioned to derive identity and legitimacy through heterosexual relationships regardless of emotional compatibility. Janaki's prolonged efforts to preserve her marriage despite profound unhappiness reflect the power of such conditioning. Her eventual decision to seek divorce therefore represents not merely a personal choice but a challenge to deeply entrenched cultural expectations.

Another notable gap within existing scholarship concerns emotional violence. Most studies acknowledge Janaki's suffering but tend to focus on visible forms of oppression such as social restriction and domestic expectation. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to the subtle forms of psychological control operating throughout the novel. Emotional neglect, silence, humiliation, surveillance, and invalidation play crucial roles in shaping Janaki's experiences. These forms of violence are particularly significant

because they reveal how patriarchy can function without physical coercion. The novel demonstrates that emotional domination may be equally destructive precisely because it leaves no visible evidence of harm.

The present study seeks to address these gaps by examining *Ancient Promises* through a radical feminist framework. Rather than treating Janaki's suffering as an individual experience, the article analyses it as the product of broader patriarchal structures embedded within marriage, family, and social ideology. The study argues that Misra presents marriage as a political institution that regulates female identity through emotional control, reproductive expectation, and psychological domination. It further contends that Janaki's pursuit of education, emotional self-awareness, and eventual divorce constitute acts of radical resistance that challenge the foundations of patriarchal authority.

By foregrounding emotional violence, domestic patriarchy, and the politics of marriage, this article offers a fresh interpretation of *Ancient Promises* and contributes to ongoing discussions concerning gender, power, and resistance within Indian English literature. In doing so, it seeks to demonstrate that Misra's novel extends beyond the story of one unhappy marriage and becomes a broader feminist critique of institutions that continue to shape women's lives in contemporary society.

3. Theoretical Framework: Radical Feminism and the Politics of Marriage

The institution of marriage has occupied a complex position within feminist discourse. While traditional social narratives frequently celebrate marriage as a source of emotional fulfilment, companionship, and social stability, feminist theorists have consistently questioned the power relations embedded within marital structures. Radical Feminism, in particular, has challenged the assumption that marriage is a neutral or purely personal institution. Instead, radical feminists argue that marriage functions as a political mechanism through which patriarchal societies regulate women's sexuality, labour, emotional expression, and autonomy. This perspective provides a particularly productive framework for examining Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises*, a novel that exposes the emotional and psychological consequences of a marriage structured around unequal power relations.

Radical Feminism emerged during the late 1960s and 1970s as one of the most influential strands of feminist thought. Unlike Liberal Feminism, which seeks equality through legal reforms and institutional changes, Radical Feminism argues that women's oppression is deeply rooted in the fundamental organisation of society. Radical feminists maintain that patriarchy constitutes a system of power that permeates every aspect of social life, including family structures, cultural practices, religious institutions, educational systems, and intimate relationships. From this perspective, individual experiences of suffering are inseparable from larger political and ideological structures.

A central principle of Radical Feminism is the assertion that "the personal is political." This slogan reflects the belief that experiences traditionally regarded as private, such as marriage, motherhood, sexuality, and domestic life, are shaped by broader systems of power. Personal suffering is therefore not merely an individual problem but a reflection of social arrangements that privilege male authority and female dependence. Janaki's experiences in *Ancient Promises* exemplify this principle because her emotional distress emerges not simply from personal incompatibility with Suresh but from a social system that normalises female sacrifice and discourages resistance.

Among the most influential radical feminist thinkers is Kate Millett, whose groundbreaking work *Sexual Politics* transformed feminist approaches to literature and culture. Millett argues that patriarchy should be understood as a political institution because it organises relationships between men and women according to unequal distributions of power. According to her, family structures play a crucial role in reproducing these inequalities by socialising women into subordinate positions and encouraging them to internalise patriarchal values.

Millett's insights illuminate the dynamics of the Maraar household in *Ancient Promises*. Janaki enters marriage as an educated young woman with aspirations and ambitions of her own. However, her individuality gradually becomes subordinate to the expectations of the family. She is expected to adapt, adjust, and conform to existing traditions without questioning their legitimacy. The repeated emphasis on adjustment reflects a broader patriarchal logic that treats women's autonomy as less important than family stability. The household therefore functions as a political institution where power is exercised through everyday practices rather than overt coercion.

Another important theoretical perspective emerges from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir argues that women have historically been positioned as the "Other" within patriarchal societies. Men are treated as autonomous subjects whose experiences define social norms, while women are defined relationally and denied full subjectivity. According to Beauvoir, women are encouraged to derive meaning from service to others rather than from independent self-realisation.

Janaki's experiences closely reflect this condition. Throughout much of the novel, her identity is defined through relationships rather than personal aspirations. She is expected to be a dutiful daughter, obedient wife, accommodating daughter-in-law, and self-sacrificing mother. Opportunities for self-definition remain limited because her value is measured according to her usefulness to others. Even her educational ambitions are considered secondary when they conflict with family expectations. Beauvoir's framework helps explain why Janaki's pursuit of education later becomes such a significant act of resistance. Learning enables her to move beyond the position of "Other" and reclaim a sense of subjectivity.

Beauvoir's distinction between immanence and transcendence is equally relevant. Immanence refers to a condition characterised by repetition, dependency, and confinement within predetermined roles. Transcendence, by contrast, involves creativity, action, and the pursuit of self-defined goals. Janaki's married life initially reflects the condition of immanence. Her days are dominated by domestic routines and emotional accommodation, leaving little room for independent growth. Education becomes important because it offers a pathway towards transcendence, enabling her to imagine possibilities beyond the limitations imposed by patriarchal expectations.

Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* provides another significant perspective for understanding the novel. Firestone argues that biological reproduction has historically been used to justify women's subordination. Patriarchal societies frequently define women's value through their reproductive capacities, encouraging them to prioritise motherhood above all other forms of achievement. As a result, women often become dependent upon family structures that reinforce inequality.

Janaki's experiences reveal the continuing relevance of Firestone's argument. Following her marriage, she increasingly views motherhood as a means of securing acceptance within the Maraar household. The hope that having a child might improve her position reflects the extent to which female identity becomes linked to reproductive expectations. Motherhood appears less as a freely chosen experience and more as a strategy for obtaining emotional validation within a hostile environment.

The birth of Riya further exposes the conditional nature of maternal acceptance. Rather than receiving unconditional support, Janaki encounters disappointment and emotional withdrawal when her daughter fails to conform to conventional expectations. Patriarchal values reward motherhood only when it produces outcomes consistent with social ideals. Firestone's analysis therefore helps explain why reproductive expectations become another mechanism through which women's lives are regulated and evaluated.

Adrienne Rich's work offers an additional framework for examining the ideological dimensions of marriage. In her influential essay on compulsory heterosexuality, Rich argues that women are culturally conditioned to view heterosexual marriage as the natural and desirable foundation of identity. Alternative possibilities are marginalised, while women are encouraged to remain within relationships regardless of emotional fulfilment.

Janaki's prolonged efforts to preserve her marriage illustrate this conditioning. Despite experiencing neglect, loneliness, and emotional suffering, she continues attempting to make the relationship work. Her persistence reflects not personal weakness but the powerful social messages encouraging women to prioritise marital preservation above personal well-being. Divorce is represented as a source of stigma and social failure, making resistance extraordinarily difficult.

Rich's perspective highlights the political significance of Janaki's eventual decision to leave her marriage. By rejecting the expectation that women must endure emotional suffering indefinitely, she challenges the ideological foundations of compulsory heterosexuality. Her decision represents a refusal to accept marriage as the sole source of identity and legitimacy.

The ideas of Betty Friedan further enrich this analysis. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan examines the dissatisfaction experienced by women whose lives are confined exclusively to domestic roles. She argues that many women experience a profound sense of emptiness because social expectations prevent them from pursuing intellectual and personal development. This dissatisfaction often remains unnamed because cultural narratives insist that marriage and motherhood should provide complete fulfilment.

Janaki's experiences closely resemble the condition Friedan describes. Despite fulfilling the roles expected of her, she remains emotionally unfulfilled and intellectually restless. The material comforts associated with married life fail to compensate for the loss of autonomy and self-expression. Her growing dissatisfaction therefore reflects not individual inadequacy but structural limitations embedded within traditional gender roles.

The work of bell hooks contributes another important dimension to this framework. Hooks conceptualises patriarchy as a political and social system that encourages domination, control, and hierarchy. Significantly, she argues that patriarchy is sustained not only by men but also by cultural values internalised by women themselves. This insight is particularly useful when examining the female characters within *Ancient Promises*.

The Maraar women participate actively in maintaining patriarchal norms. Janaki's mother-in-law enforces expectations concerning obedience and conformity, while her own mother encourages compliance in the name of family honour. These characters demonstrate that patriarchy survives not simply through male authority but through cultural conditioning that encourages women to police one another. Hooks' perspective therefore complicates simplistic explanations of oppression by revealing the multiple ways in which power operates.

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for understanding marriage in *Ancient Promises*. Millett exposes the political nature of family structures. Beauvoir explains the denial of female subjectivity. Firestone highlights reproductive control. Rich reveals the ideological pressures surrounding marriage. Friedan illuminates domestic dissatisfaction, while hooks demonstrate how patriarchal values become internalised and reproduced.

Applied to Misra's novel, *Radical Feminism* reveals that marriage functions not as a neutral institution but as a mechanism of regulation and control. Janaki's suffering emerges from a system that expects women to sacrifice ambition, suppress dissatisfaction,

and derive identity from service to others. Her eventual resistance acquires political significance because it challenges assumptions that have long governed female existence.

Through this framework, *Ancient Promises* becomes more than a story of marital failure. It emerges as a powerful feminist critique of institutions that normalise emotional violence, reward female obedience, and restrict opportunities for self-definition. Janaki's journey towards autonomy therefore represents not merely personal liberation but a challenge to patriarchal structures that continue to shape women's lives in contemporary society.

4. Feminist Interpretation

A feminist interpretation of Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises* reveals the novel as a powerful critique of the structures that regulate women's lives through marriage, domesticity, emotional conditioning, and social expectation. Although the narrative appears on the surface to focus on an unhappy marriage and a woman's struggle for personal fulfilment, a deeper feminist reading uncovers a sustained examination of patriarchal power and its influence on female identity. Misra demonstrates that women's oppression is not always maintained through visible acts of violence or overt domination. Instead, patriarchy often operates through emotional manipulation, social conditioning, moral obligation, and cultural narratives that encourage women to accept sacrifice as an essential component of femininity.

One of the central concerns of feminist criticism is the relationship between gender and power. Feminist theorists argue that societies frequently organise social institutions in ways that privilege male authority while restricting women's autonomy. Marriage occupies a particularly important position within this framework because it shapes expectations concerning sexuality, labour, reproduction, and emotional responsibility. In *Ancient Promises*, marriage functions not merely as a personal relationship but as an institution that regulates female behaviour and defines the boundaries of acceptable womanhood.

Janaki's marriage to Suresh Maraar illustrates this process from the very beginning. The decision is presented as a practical and socially desirable arrangement, yet the desires and aspirations of the woman most affected by it receive comparatively little consideration. Her emotional attachment to Arjun, her educational ambitions, and her vision of the future are subordinated to the expectations of family and community. The marriage therefore represents more than a personal compromise. It reflects a social order in which women's choices are frequently regarded as less important than collective interests and cultural traditions.

A feminist reading highlights how marriage becomes a patriarchal contract that demands adjustment primarily from women. Throughout the novel, Janaki is repeatedly expected to accommodate the needs, preferences, and expectations of others. The language of adjustment appears frequently within the narrative and carries significant ideological weight. Adjustment is presented as a virtue, yet the responsibility for adjustment falls disproportionately upon women. Men are rarely required to alter their behaviour or aspirations to the same extent. The expectation that women should adapt endlessly reveals the unequal power relations embedded within the institution of marriage.

The novel also foregrounds the issue of emotional labour, a concept that has become increasingly important within feminist scholarship. Emotional labour refers to the often-invisible work involved in maintaining relationships, managing conflict, providing comfort, and ensuring social harmony. Women are frequently expected to perform this labour without recognition or reciprocity. Janaki's experiences illustrate this reality with remarkable clarity. She constantly attempts to preserve relationships, avoid conflict, and accommodate the feelings of those around her. Even when she experiences loneliness, disappointment, and emotional neglect, she continues to invest energy in sustaining a household that offers little emotional support in return.

Misra exposes the asymmetrical nature of this arrangement. Janaki's efforts to maintain harmony are rarely acknowledged, while her own emotional needs remain largely invisible. The burden of emotional responsibility falls overwhelmingly upon her, reflecting broader cultural expectations that associate caregiving, patience, and sacrifice with femininity. A feminist interpretation therefore reveals that emotional labour functions as another mechanism through which women's contributions are exploited and undervalued.

The domestic sphere occupies a similarly significant position within the novel. Traditional cultural narratives often portray the home as a space of comfort, security, and belonging. Feminist scholars, however, have frequently questioned this idealised image by examining the ways in which domestic spaces can also function as sites of surveillance and control. In *Ancient Promises*, the Maraar household embodies this contradiction. While outwardly respectable and socially admired, it creates an environment in which individuality is constrained and conformity is rigorously enforced.

Janaki's behaviour, appearance, speech, and decisions are subjected to continuous scrutiny. Family members monitor her actions and evaluate her performance according to standards that privilege obedience and compliance. Such surveillance does not require physical force because its effectiveness depends upon internalisation. Women learn to regulate themselves in anticipation of judgement and criticism. The result is a form of control that appears natural and ordinary even while limiting personal freedom.

The issue of female silence emerges as another important feminist concern. Silence in the novel functions both as a survival strategy and as a political condition. Janaki frequently suppresses dissatisfaction, disappointment, and anger because open resistance

risks social disapproval and familial conflict. Her silence is not evidence of acceptance but a reflection of the limited options available to women within patriarchal environments.

Feminist theory has long recognised that silence can be imposed as effectively as physical restraint. Women are often discouraged from expressing dissatisfaction because doing so threatens established hierarchies. In *Ancient Promises*, Janaki learns that maintaining peace frequently requires suppressing her own voice. Over time, this suppression contributes to emotional isolation and a diminished sense of self. The novel therefore illustrates how silence becomes a mechanism through which patriarchy maintains authority while avoiding direct confrontation.

Closely related to silence is the issue of emotional violence. One of Misra's most important contributions lies in her depiction of forms of suffering that remain largely invisible. Janaki is not subjected to regular physical abuse. Instead, she experiences neglect, indifference, humiliation, dismissal, and emotional abandonment. These experiences are often difficult to identify because they leave no visible scars. Yet their cumulative impact is devastating.

A feminist interpretation recognises emotional violence as a significant form of oppression. Patriarchal cultures frequently acknowledge physical abuse while minimising emotional harm. Women who experience psychological suffering are often encouraged to endure it quietly because emotional wounds lack the visibility associated with physical injury. Misra challenges this assumption by demonstrating that emotional violence can profoundly affect identity, confidence, and well-being. Janaki's gradual loss of self-esteem illustrates the destructive consequences of sustained emotional neglect.

Another important dimension of the novel concerns internalised patriarchy. Feminist scholarship increasingly emphasises that patriarchal systems are not maintained exclusively by men. Women themselves may participate in reproducing oppressive values because they have been socialised to accept them as natural and necessary. This insight is particularly relevant to the female characters surrounding Janaki.

The *Maraar* women frequently act as enforcers of patriarchal norms. Expectations concerning obedience, respectability, and sacrifice are often communicated through female rather than male authority. Similarly, Janaki's own mother encourages compliance in the name of family honour and social approval. These characters are not simply villains; they are products of a system that teaches women to measure success according to conformity and endurance. Their actions demonstrate how patriarchal values become embedded within cultural practices and transmitted across generations.

The treatment of motherhood further strengthens the novel's feminist significance. Traditional ideologies frequently present motherhood as a woman's highest achievement and primary source of identity. While Misra acknowledges the emotional importance of motherhood, she also exposes the pressures associated with maternal expectation. Janaki initially believes that becoming a mother may improve her position within the family and strengthen emotional bonds. Yet the reality proves far more complex.

Riya's disability reveals the conditional nature of social acceptance. Motherhood is celebrated only when it conforms to cultural ideals regarding family, success, and normality. When these expectations are disrupted, women may find themselves blamed or marginalised. Through Janaki's experiences, Misra demonstrates how motherhood can become another arena in which patriarchal values regulate female behaviour and identity.

Despite the numerous forms of oppression depicted throughout the narrative, *Ancient Promises* is ultimately a novel about resistance. Janaki's transformation from compliance to self-awareness represents the central movement of the text. Importantly, this transformation occurs gradually. She does not suddenly reject every aspect of her social environment. Instead, resistance develops through education, reflection, emotional honesty, and increasing confidence in her own judgement.

Education plays a particularly significant role in this process because it enables Janaki to question assumptions that had previously seemed natural and inevitable. Learning broadens her perspective and encourages critical engagement with the structures shaping her life. Through education, she begins to recognise that many of the limitations she experiences are socially constructed rather than personally deserved.

Her eventual decision to seek divorce constitutes the culmination of this transformation. From a feminist perspective, divorce carries profound symbolic significance because it challenges the belief that women must preserve marriage regardless of personal cost. By leaving an emotionally destructive relationship, Janaki rejects a social order that prioritises appearances over well-being and conformity over dignity.

The novel therefore transcends the story of one woman's unhappy marriage. It becomes a broader critique of systems that demand female obedience while denying women emotional fulfilment, intellectual freedom, and personal autonomy. Misra reveals that patriarchy survives not merely through laws and institutions but through everyday practices, cultural expectations, and emotional conditioning that encourage women to accept inequality as normal.

Ultimately, a feminist interpretation of *Ancient Promises* demonstrates that the novel is far more than a narrative of marital disappointment. It is a sustained examination of power, identity, and resistance within patriarchal society. Through Janaki's journey,

Misra exposes the hidden mechanisms through which women's lives are regulated while simultaneously affirming the possibility of self-definition, dignity, and liberation. Her transformation from a woman conditioned to endure suffering into an individual capable of asserting her own worth represents one of the most powerful feminist statements in contemporary Indian English fiction.

5. Textual Analysis

Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises* unfolds as a deeply personal narrative that simultaneously functions as a broader critique of patriarchal social structures. While the novel is often discussed as a story of failed romance and marital dissatisfaction, a closer textual examination reveals a sustained exploration of emotional violence, gendered power, and female resistance. The narrative traces Janaki's movement from youthful idealism to psychological fragmentation and finally towards self-definition. Through this progression, Misra exposes the subtle mechanisms through which patriarchy disciplines women and demonstrates how resistance gradually emerges from within structures designed to suppress autonomy.

The novel begins with Janaki as an intelligent, emotionally sensitive young woman growing up in Delhi. Her relationship with Arjun represents more than adolescent romance. It symbolizes the possibility of emotional choice, personal freedom, and self-directed identity. For the first time, Janaki imagines a future shaped by mutual affection rather than social obligation. The relationship allows her to experience emotional reciprocity and personal agency, qualities that later become largely absent from her married life.

However, this possibility is abruptly interrupted by family intervention. The decision to arrange Janaki's marriage demonstrates the extent to which female desire remains subordinate to social expectation. Her emotional attachment to Arjun receives little serious consideration because marriage is viewed primarily as a family matter rather than an individual choice. The narrative reveals how patriarchal authority often disguises itself as parental concern. Family members present the marriage as a practical and beneficial arrangement, yet the underlying message remains clear: individual aspiration must yield to collective expectation.

The transition from Delhi to Valapadu marks one of the most significant shifts in the novel. This movement is not merely geographical. It represents a movement from relative freedom towards increasing confinement. Delhi symbolises intellectual openness, mobility, and personal possibility. Valapadu, by contrast, embodies tradition, surveillance, and social rigidity. Through this contrast, Misra establishes the emotional and ideological landscape within which Janaki's struggle will unfold.

The Maraar household occupies a central position in the narrative because it functions as a microcosm of patriarchal society. Every aspect of domestic life appears governed by expectations concerning obedience, respectability, and conformity. The household is not overtly violent, yet its atmosphere is deeply restrictive. Janaki enters this environment as an outsider expected to adapt completely to established customs and routines.

Misra carefully illustrates how domestic spaces become instruments of control. The expectations imposed upon Janaki extend beyond practical responsibilities. She is expected to think, behave, and respond in ways consistent with the family's values. Her individuality becomes increasingly difficult to maintain because every deviation from expectation attracts criticism or disapproval. The household therefore operates through continuous regulation rather than direct coercion.

The figure of Suresh Maraar further reinforces this dynamic. Unlike stereotypical representations of abusive husbands, Suresh's oppression is characterised by emotional distance and indifference rather than overt aggression. His failure to provide emotional support becomes one of the most damaging aspects of Janaki's experience. Marriage promises companionship and intimacy, yet Janaki finds herself trapped within a relationship marked by silence and emotional absence.

This emotional neglect carries profound consequences. Human relationships depend upon recognition, empathy, and communication. When these elements are absent, individuals may begin to doubt their own worth and legitimacy. Janaki's growing sense of loneliness reflects precisely this process. She finds herself surrounded by people yet profoundly isolated. The emotional starvation she experiences gradually erodes her confidence and sense of self.

Misra's portrayal of psychological confinement is particularly effective because it highlights forms of suffering that remain largely invisible. Physical abuse is absent, allowing family members and society to maintain the appearance of normality. Yet emotional neglect, humiliation, and invalidation create an environment that is equally destructive. The novel thereby challenges assumptions that oppression must always be visible to be real.

The recurring expectation that Janaki should adjust further intensifies this condition. Adjustment appears throughout the narrative as a cultural virtue associated with good womanhood. Women are expected to accommodate circumstances, suppress dissatisfaction, and prioritise harmony above personal fulfilment. The language of adjustment therefore functions ideologically by normalising inequality. Rather than questioning unfair conditions, women are encouraged to modify themselves in order to endure them.

Another significant dimension of the text is the relationship between emotional control and social respectability. The Maraar family places considerable importance on appearances and reputation. Public image often receives greater attention than emotional

well-being. This emphasis creates a situation in which suffering must remain hidden in order to preserve social legitimacy. Janaki learns that expressing dissatisfaction threatens not only family harmony but also collective respectability.

Motherhood introduces a new phase within the narrative. Initially, Janaki imagines that having a child might strengthen emotional bonds and improve her position within the family. This expectation reflects a widespread cultural belief that motherhood can provide fulfilment and stability even when other aspects of life remain unsatisfactory. However, Misra quickly complicates this assumption through the birth of Riya.

Riya's developmental challenges transform motherhood into a source of both emotional attachment and social anxiety. Instead of receiving increased support, Janaki encounters further isolation. The family's response reveals the conditional nature of acceptance within patriarchal systems. Motherhood is celebrated only when it conforms to social expectations regarding normality and success. When these expectations are disrupted, women often bear disproportionate responsibility for the perceived failure.

The treatment of Riya exposes another important aspect of patriarchal culture: its discomfort with vulnerability and difference. Rather than responding with compassion and solidarity, family members frequently retreat into silence and denial. Janaki is therefore forced to confront these challenges largely on her own. The experience intensifies her emotional burden while simultaneously contributing to her growing awareness of social injustice.

One of the most powerful aspects of the novel is the way motherhood becomes intertwined with resistance. Caring for Riya encourages Janaki to question assumptions she had previously accepted. Her daughter's needs require advocacy, determination, and independent judgement. As a result, motherhood gradually transforms from a mechanism of control into a catalyst for self-awareness.

The narrative reaches a critical turning point when Janaki reconnects emotionally with Arjun. This development has often been interpreted merely as a romantic subplot. A closer reading, however, suggests a more complex significance. Arjun represents a reminder of the self that existed before marriage and domestic confinement. His presence reawakens memories of possibility, choice, and emotional reciprocity.

Importantly, the novel does not romanticise this relationship. Rather, it uses the connection to highlight the extent of Janaki's emotional deprivation. Her attachment to Arjun emerges not simply from romantic longing but from a desire for recognition and understanding. The relationship therefore exposes the emotional deficiencies within her marriage rather than functioning solely as an alternative love story.

The mental hospital episode represents one of the most striking examples of institutional control within the narrative. When Janaki attempts to articulate her emotional reality, her distress is interpreted as instability and irrationality. This response reflects a long history of associating female dissent with madness. Women who challenge social expectations are frequently portrayed as emotionally unstable precisely because such characterisations undermine the legitimacy of their resistance.

Misra uses this episode to expose the mechanisms through which patriarchal systems discredit female experience. Janaki's suffering is not addressed or understood. Instead, it is pathologised. By transforming legitimate emotional distress into evidence of instability, patriarchal authority protects itself from criticism while further marginalising women.

The significance of this episode extends beyond the individual narrative. It demonstrates how institutions can reinforce existing power structures by validating dominant perspectives and dismissing dissenting voices. Janaki's struggle therefore acquires broader political implications because it reveals the relationship between personal suffering and institutional authority.

The demand for divorce constitutes the most dramatic moment of rupture within the novel. For much of the narrative, Janaki attempts to adapt, endure, and preserve relationships despite significant emotional cost. Her decision to seek divorce marks a decisive rejection of these expectations. It represents the moment at which self-preservation becomes more important than social approval.

From a textual perspective, divorce functions as both an ending and a beginning. It ends Janaki's participation in a relationship characterised by neglect and control while simultaneously creating space for self-definition and autonomy. The decision challenges cultural assumptions that equate female virtue with endurance and demonstrate that resistance may require the rejection of institutions previously regarded as inevitable.

The progression from submission to resistance forms the central movement of the novel. Janaki's transformation does not occur suddenly. It develops through accumulated experiences of disappointment, reflection, education, and emotional awakening. Each stage contributes to a growing recognition that her suffering is not a personal failure but a consequence of structural inequality.

By the conclusion of the narrative, Janaki has evolved from a woman conditioned to accommodate the desires of others into an individual capable of asserting her own worth. This transformation constitutes the novel's most important feminist achievement. Misra demonstrates that resistance often emerges gradually through the recovery of selfhood rather than through dramatic acts of rebellion alone.

Ultimately, a close textual reading of *Ancient Promises* reveals a narrative deeply concerned with the politics of everyday life. Marriage, family, motherhood, and domesticity are shown to be sites where power operates continuously and often invisibly. Through Janaki's experiences, Misra exposes the emotional and psychological costs of patriarchal authority while simultaneously affirming the possibility of agency, dignity, and liberation. The novel therefore transcends the story of one woman's unhappy marriage and becomes a powerful exploration of resistance against structures designed to silence and contain women.

6. Marriage as Patriarchal Institution

Marriage occupies a central place within the ideological framework of patriarchal societies because it functions not merely as a personal relationship but as a social institution through which power, authority, and gender roles are reproduced. While cultural narratives frequently celebrate marriage as a sacred union founded upon companionship, mutual respect, and emotional fulfilment, feminist theorists have consistently questioned the realities concealed beneath these idealised representations. Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises* contributes significantly to this critique by exposing the unequal power structures embedded within marriage and demonstrating how these structures influence women's lives, aspirations, and identities. Through Janaki's experiences, the novel reveals marriage as an institution that frequently demands female compliance while rewarding conformity and silence.

From a radical feminist perspective, marriage cannot be understood solely as a private arrangement between two individuals. Instead, it operates as a social mechanism that regulates women's sexuality, labour, mobility, and emotional expression. The institution derives much of its power from cultural legitimacy. Because marriage is widely regarded as desirable and necessary, its inequalities often remain invisible. Women are encouraged to view sacrifice as love, obedience as virtue, and endurance as strength. Consequently, forms of domination embedded within marriage frequently appear natural rather than political.

Janaki's marriage to Suresh Maraar exemplifies this dynamic. The decision is presented as beneficial for everyone involved. Family members regard the alliance as socially appropriate and culturally respectable. Yet the process through which the marriage is arranged reveals a fundamental imbalance of power. The aspirations, desires, and emotional attachments of the young woman whose life will be transformed by the decision receive limited consideration. Her future becomes the subject of negotiation among others, reflecting a social system in which female autonomy is frequently subordinated to collective interests.

The arranged marriage system depicted in the novel illustrates what many feminist scholars describe as the commodification of women. Commodification occurs when individuals are evaluated primarily according to their usefulness within existing social structures rather than their personal desires or aspirations. Within patriarchal marriage systems, women are often valued according to qualities such as obedience, respectability, family background, and reproductive potential. These qualities enhance their suitability as wives while simultaneously reducing their individuality.

Janaki's experiences demonstrate this process with considerable clarity. Her educational ambitions, emotional preferences, and personal goals are treated as secondary considerations when compared with the advantages associated with the proposed marriage. The emphasis falls not upon her happiness but upon the successful completion of a social arrangement. Marriage therefore functions less as a partnership between equals and more as a mechanism through which women are integrated into structures already designed by others.

The concept of adjustment occupies a particularly important place within the novel's critique of marriage. Throughout the narrative, Janaki repeatedly encounters the expectation that she must adjust to her circumstances. The term appears benign and even admirable. Cultural discourse often presents adjustment as evidence of maturity, patience, and good character. Yet a closer examination reveals that the demand for adjustment is profoundly gendered.

Women are expected to modify their behaviour, suppress dissatisfaction, and accommodate the needs of others in order to preserve harmony. Men, by contrast, are rarely subjected to comparable expectations. The burden of maintaining relationships falls disproportionately upon women, who are taught that successful marriage depends upon their willingness to compromise endlessly. Misra exposes the ideological function of adjustment by showing how it transforms inequality into moral obligation.

The repeated expectation that Janaki should adjust discourages critical examination of the conditions requiring adjustment in the first place. Instead of questioning whether her treatment is fair, she is encouraged to focus on improving her ability to tolerate it. This shift in emphasis benefits patriarchal structures because it places responsibility for resolving conflict upon those experiencing disadvantage rather than upon those exercising power.

The Maraar household serves as a powerful representation of domestic patriarchy. Domestic patriarchy refers to the ways in which family structures reproduce broader social hierarchies by assigning authority, responsibility, and value according to gender. Within the household, power is distributed unevenly. Certain voices carry greater legitimacy than others, while expectations regarding behaviour vary according to position within the family hierarchy.

Janaki enters this environment as someone expected to learn and conform rather than participate equally in decision-making. Her role is defined through service, adaptation, and emotional labour. Household routines, traditions, and expectations operate

collectively to reinforce her subordinate position. Although explicit coercion is relatively rare, the cumulative effect of these practices is highly restrictive.

Misra's portrayal of domestic patriarchy is particularly effective because it highlights its everyday nature. Oppression does not always appear through dramatic acts of domination. More often, it emerges through ordinary interactions, routine expectations, and seemingly harmless assumptions. The normality of these practices makes them difficult to challenge because they are perceived as natural aspects of family life rather than manifestations of unequal power relations.

The issue of family honour further strengthens patriarchal authority within the novel. Honour functions as a social value that links individual behaviour to collective reputation. Women frequently become the primary bearers of this responsibility because their conduct is viewed as reflecting the moral character of the family as a whole. Consequently, female autonomy is often restricted in the name of protecting social respectability.

Janaki's experiences reveal the pressures created by this system. Personal dissatisfaction must frequently remain unspoken because public acknowledgment of conflict threatens family honour. Decisions are evaluated not solely according to their impact upon individual well-being but also according to their potential social consequences. The result is a situation in which women may endure considerable suffering in order to preserve appearances.

The emphasis on honour creates an environment where silence becomes a virtue and resistance becomes a source of shame. Women who challenge expectations risk being perceived as selfish, irresponsible, or disruptive. Patriarchal authority therefore extends beyond the household into the wider community through systems of social judgement and moral surveillance.

Marriage in *Ancient Promises* also functions as a disciplinary institution. A disciplinary institution shapes behaviour by establishing norms and encouraging individuals to regulate themselves according to those norms. Unlike systems that rely primarily upon force, disciplinary structures operate through internalisation. Individuals learn to monitor their own behaviour because they anticipate approval or criticism from others.

Janaki's gradual self-surveillance illustrates this process. She becomes increasingly aware of expectations concerning speech, appearance, conduct, and emotional expression. The need to avoid disapproval encourages caution and restraint. Over time, external control becomes internal discipline as she begins to regulate herself according to standards established by others.

This process contributes significantly to the erosion of selfhood depicted throughout the novel. When individuals constantly evaluate themselves through external expectations, personal desires and aspirations may become increasingly difficult to recognise. Janaki's struggle to preserve a sense of individuality reflects the psychological consequences of prolonged disciplinary control.

A particularly important aspect of Misra's critique is her rejection of romantic myths surrounding marriage. Popular cultural narratives frequently portray marriage as the culmination of personal happiness and emotional fulfilment. Difficulties may arise, but they are generally presented as temporary obstacles within an ultimately rewarding institution. *Ancient Promises* challenges this narrative by revealing the gap between ideological representation and lived reality.

Janaki enters marriage with hopes shaped by cultural expectations. She anticipates companionship, emotional intimacy, and mutual respect. Instead, she encounters isolation, neglect, and disappointment. The contrast between expectation and experience exposes the inadequacy of romantic myths that obscure structural inequalities. Misra suggests that marriage cannot automatically provide fulfilment when power relations remain fundamentally unequal.

Importantly, the novel does not argue that all marriages are inherently oppressive. Rather, it critiques social arrangements that prioritise institution over individual well-being and conformity over personal freedom. The problem lies not in companionship itself but in structures that demand female sacrifice while offering limited reciprocity.

Education emerges as a significant challenge to these structures because it enables Janaki to analyse her circumstances critically. Learning broadens her understanding of the world and encourages independent thought. As her intellectual confidence grows, she becomes increasingly capable of recognising the inequalities embedded within her marriage. Education therefore functions as a counterforce to disciplinary control by fostering awareness and self-reflection.

The eventual breakdown of the marriage acquires profound symbolic significance within this context. Divorce represents more than the end of a relationship. It signifies a rejection of the assumptions that have governed Janaki's life for years. By refusing to continue sacrificing her well-being in order to preserve appearances, she challenges the authority of an institution that demands obedience while denying fulfilment.

Misra's portrayal of this decision is particularly important because it reframes divorce as an act of self-preservation rather than failure. Traditional social narratives often depict divorced women as individuals unable to fulfil expected roles. *Ancient Promises* reverses this logic by suggesting that remaining within a destructive relationship may represent a greater loss than leaving it. The novel therefore challenges cultural assumptions that equate female virtue with endurance regardless of personal cost.

Ultimately, *Ancient Promises* presents marriage as a complex institution deeply implicated in the reproduction of patriarchal power. Through Janaki's experiences, Misra reveals how marriage can function as a mechanism of regulation, discipline, and control

while simultaneously maintaining an appearance of normality and respectability. By exposing the emotional, psychological, and ideological dimensions of this process, the novel dismantles romantic myths surrounding marriage and invites readers to reconsider the relationship between intimacy, power, and autonomy. In doing so, it offers a powerful feminist critique of social structures that continue to shape women's lives and opportunities in contemporary society.

7. Emotional Violence and Psychological Oppression

One of the most significant contributions of Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises* lies in its exploration of emotional violence as a pervasive yet often overlooked form of patriarchal oppression. While discussions of gender-based violence frequently focus on physical abuse, the novel draws attention to psychological suffering that operates through neglect, indifference, invalidation, emotional isolation, and the systematic erosion of self-worth. Misra demonstrates that emotional violence can be equally destructive because it attacks the foundations of identity while remaining largely invisible to outsiders. Through Janaki's experiences, the novel exposes how patriarchal power often functions not through overt aggression but through subtle practices that gradually undermine confidence, autonomy, and psychological well-being.

A defining characteristic of emotional violence is its invisibility. Physical abuse leaves visible evidence that may be recognised and condemned by society. Emotional abuse, by contrast, often occurs within ordinary interactions and therefore remains difficult to identify. Victims may struggle to articulate their experiences because the harm is psychological rather than physical. Family members and communities frequently dismiss emotional suffering as oversensitivity, misunderstanding, or personal weakness. This invisibility allows emotional violence to persist without attracting the attention directed towards more visible forms of abuse.

Janaki's married life illustrates this reality with remarkable precision. She is not subjected to regular physical aggression, nor does she live in an environment marked by overt brutality. Yet her experiences are characterised by persistent emotional neglect. The absence of physical violence enables others to view her marriage as normal and successful, even while she experiences profound psychological distress. Misra thereby challenges the assumption that the absence of physical abuse necessarily indicates the presence of emotional well-being.

Emotional neglect emerges as one of the most damaging aspects of Janaki's relationship with Suresh Maraar. Emotional neglect occurs when an individual's feelings, needs, and experiences are consistently ignored or minimised. Unlike active hostility, neglect operates through absence rather than action. The neglected person gradually comes to feel invisible because emotional expression receives little acknowledgment or response.

Suresh's indifference plays a crucial role in creating this condition. Throughout the novel, he remains emotionally distant and largely uninterested in Janaki's inner life. Her aspirations, fears, disappointments, and hopes rarely receive meaningful engagement. Conversations lack emotional depth, and opportunities for intimacy remain limited. The marriage therefore becomes characterised by coexistence rather than companionship.

This emotional distance carries profound consequences. Human beings develop a sense of identity partly through recognition by others. Relationships provide validation, support, and confirmation of personal worth. When such recognition is absent, individuals may begin to doubt the legitimacy of their own feelings and experiences. Janaki's growing loneliness reflects precisely this process. Despite living within a family environment, she experiences increasing emotional isolation because her inner life remains largely unseen.

Silence functions as another important mechanism of psychological oppression within the novel. Silence is often associated with peace and harmony, yet Misra reveals its darker dimensions. The silence surrounding Janaki's suffering prevents meaningful communication and reinforces existing power structures. Emotional concerns remain unspoken because acknowledging them threatens the appearance of normality upon which the family depends.

This silence is not merely interpersonal but also cultural. Women are frequently socialised to endure dissatisfaction quietly in order to preserve family stability and social respectability. Expressions of anger, frustration, or unhappiness may be interpreted as signs of ingratitude or failure. Consequently, many women learn to suppress emotions that challenge dominant expectations.

Janaki's silence reflects this broader social reality. She often chooses not to voice her concerns because doing so risks conflict and disapproval. Yet the suppression of emotion carries significant psychological costs. Feelings denied expression do not disappear; instead, they accumulate and contribute to emotional exhaustion. The novel therefore illustrates how silence can become a form of self-erasure when individuals feel unable to articulate their experiences.

Closely connected to silence is the practice of invalidation. Invalidation occurs when an individual's emotions, perceptions, or concerns are dismissed as unreasonable or unimportant. Rather than addressing the source of distress, others question the legitimacy of the distress itself. This process undermines confidence because individuals begin to doubt their own judgement and emotional responses.

Throughout the novel, Janaki repeatedly encounters forms of invalidation. Her dissatisfaction is treated as a personal problem rather than a response to genuine inequality. Family members encourage adaptation rather than understanding. Emotional pain is interpreted as evidence of insufficient adjustment rather than as a legitimate reaction to neglect and isolation.

The cumulative effect of invalidation is psychological fragmentation. Fragmentation refers to the gradual breakdown of a coherent sense of self resulting from conflicting expectations and sustained emotional pressure. Janaki's experiences illustrate this condition vividly. On one hand, she recognises her unhappiness and longs for a different life. On the other hand, cultural expectations encourage her to believe that endurance constitutes virtue and that dissatisfaction reflects personal inadequacy.

This conflict creates profound internal tension. She struggles to reconcile her emotional reality with the social narratives surrounding marriage and femininity. The discrepancy between experience and expectation generates confusion, self-doubt, and emotional instability. Rather than questioning the structures causing her suffering, she initially questions herself.

A feminist reading of the novel reveals that this self-doubt is not accidental. Patriarchal systems often depend upon encouraging women to internalise responsibility for conditions they did not create. When individuals believe they are personally at fault for structural inequalities, resistance becomes less likely. Emotional oppression therefore functions effectively because it redirects attention away from power relations and towards personal inadequacy.

The concept of gaslighting provides another useful framework for understanding Janaki's experiences. Gaslighting refers to processes through which individuals are encouraged to doubt their perceptions and interpretations of reality. Although the term does not appear explicitly within the novel, many of Janaki's experiences resemble this phenomenon. Her emotional responses are frequently questioned or minimised, creating uncertainty regarding the validity of her own feelings.

When women are repeatedly told that they are overreacting, imagining problems, or failing to appreciate their circumstances, they may begin to distrust their own judgement. This erosion of confidence increases dependence upon external authority because individuals no longer feel capable of interpreting their experiences independently. Misra's portrayal of Janaki captures this process with considerable subtlety, illustrating how emotional control can operate without direct coercion.

The relationship between patriarchy and mental health occupies a particularly important place within the narrative. Feminist scholars have long argued that psychological distress cannot always be understood solely as an individual condition. Social environments characterised by inequality, exclusion, and emotional repression frequently contribute to mental suffering. Women's mental health is therefore deeply connected to the structures shaping their daily lives.

Janaki's emotional struggles reflect this connection. Her distress emerges not from personal weakness but from prolonged exposure to neglect, invalidation, and isolation. The novel challenges medicalised interpretations of suffering that focus exclusively on individual pathology while ignoring social context. Misra suggests that emotional pain often reflects the realities of oppressive environments rather than deficiencies within the person experiencing it.

This critique becomes particularly powerful during the mental hospital episode. The episode represents one of the most disturbing moments in the novel because it demonstrates how institutions may reinforce patriarchal authority. Rather than recognising the social and emotional factors contributing to Janaki's distress, her suffering is interpreted as evidence of instability. The focus shifts from understanding her experiences to managing her behaviour.

Historically, women who challenged social norms were frequently labelled irrational, hysterical, or mentally unstable. Such labels served important political functions because they discredited dissent while preserving existing power structures. The mental hospital episode reflects this history by illustrating how institutions can transform legitimate suffering into pathology.

Misra does not suggest that mental health concerns are unimportant. Instead, she questions the tendency to separate psychological distress from its social causes. Janaki's experiences demonstrate that emotional suffering often has political dimensions. When individuals live within environments characterised by inequality and emotional deprivation, distress becomes a rational response rather than evidence of personal failure.

The episode also highlights the relationship between authority and credibility. Patriarchal institutions frequently possess greater power to define reality than the individuals affected by them. Janaki's interpretation of her own experiences carries less legitimacy than the perspectives of those occupying positions of authority. This imbalance reinforces her marginalisation and deepens feelings of powerlessness.

Despite these challenges, emotional suffering eventually contributes to resistance. The very experiences that undermine Janaki's confidence also reveal the unsustainability of her situation. Emotional pain becomes a source of insight because it exposes the gap between cultural ideals and lived reality. Her growing awareness of this gap encourages critical reflection and ultimately strengthens her determination to seek change.

By the later stages of the novel, Janaki begins to recognise that her suffering is not simply a personal problem but a consequence of broader social structures. This recognition marks an important step towards liberation because it transforms self-blame into

understanding. Once emotional distress is understood as a response to oppression rather than evidence of inadequacy, the possibility of resistance becomes imaginable.

Ultimately, *Ancient Promises* presents emotional violence as a central mechanism through which patriarchy maintains control while avoiding public scrutiny. Through neglect, silence, invalidation, and psychological isolation, women are encouraged to question themselves rather than the structures limiting their freedom. Misra's portrayal challenges conventional understandings of abuse by demonstrating that emotional suffering can be as damaging as physical harm. The novel therefore expands feminist discussions of violence by highlighting the importance of recognising psychological oppression as a serious and pervasive form of patriarchal power. In doing so, it offers a powerful critique of social systems that continue to dismiss women's emotional experiences while demanding their endless endurance.

8. Motherhood, Reproductive Expectations and Control

Motherhood occupies a complex and often contested position within feminist discourse. Traditional social narratives frequently celebrate motherhood as the highest expression of feminine fulfilment, portraying maternal devotion as natural, instinctive, and universally rewarding. Within patriarchal cultures, women are often encouraged to regard motherhood as both a duty and a destiny. Their value is measured not only through their ability to bear children but also through their willingness to subordinate personal aspirations to maternal responsibilities. Radical feminist theorists have challenged these assumptions by arguing that motherhood, as an institution, frequently functions as a mechanism through which patriarchal societies regulate women's bodies, identities, and life choices. Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises* engages deeply with these issues by presenting motherhood as a site of both oppression and transformation. Through Janaki's experiences as Riya's mother, the novel reveals the emotional burdens, social expectations, and political implications associated with reproductive roles while simultaneously demonstrating how maternal responsibility can become a source of resistance and empowerment.

From a radical feminist perspective, motherhood cannot be understood solely as a personal experience. Feminist thinkers such as Adrienne Rich and Shulamith Firestone distinguish between motherhood as a relationship and motherhood as an institution. While the relationship between mother and child may provide emotional fulfilment and meaningful connection, the institution of motherhood often imposes expectations that restrict women's autonomy and reinforce patriarchal authority. Women are expected to place the needs of children and family above their own aspirations, thereby ensuring the continuation of gendered divisions of labour and power.

Janaki's experiences illustrate this distinction with considerable clarity. Following her marriage, motherhood appears as one of the few remaining sources of hope. Emotional intimacy within her marriage remains limited, and opportunities for personal fulfilment are increasingly restricted. Under such circumstances, motherhood seems capable of providing the affection, purpose, and recognition absent from other areas of her life. Her anticipation reflects broader cultural narratives that encourage women to seek meaning through maternal identity.

However, Misra quickly complicates this expectation. The birth of Riya does not resolve the tensions characterising Janaki's existence. Instead, it introduces new forms of responsibility, anxiety, and social pressure. The novel thereby challenges idealised representations of motherhood by demonstrating that maternal experience often unfolds within structures shaped by inequality and expectation. Rather than functioning as an uncomplicated source of fulfilment, motherhood becomes another arena in which patriarchal values exert influence.

Shulamith Firestone's analysis of reproductive politics provides a useful framework for understanding this dimension of the novel. Firestone argues that biological reproduction has historically contributed to women's subordination because societies organise social roles around reproductive functions. Women become associated with caregiving, dependency, and domesticity, while men retain greater access to public power and autonomy. Although social conditions have changed significantly, many of the expectations surrounding motherhood continue to reflect these historical patterns.

Janaki's position within the Maraar household reflects this reality. Following the birth of Riya, responsibility for childcare falls overwhelmingly upon her. The assumption that caregiving constitutes a natural extension of female identity ensures that maternal labour remains largely unquestioned and undervalued. Family members may express concern, but the practical and emotional burdens associated with raising a child rest primarily upon the mother. This unequal distribution of responsibility demonstrates how reproductive expectations continue to shape women's lives in ways that limit personal freedom and opportunity.

The significance of Riya's developmental challenges further intensifies these dynamics. In many societies, motherhood is celebrated only when it conforms to cultural expectations regarding normality, success, and achievement. Mothers are often judged according to the perceived accomplishments and behaviour of their children. When children fail to meet socially defined standards, women frequently experience blame, scrutiny, and emotional isolation.

Misra exposes this phenomenon through the family's response to Riya's condition. Rather than receiving unconditional support, Janaki often encounters misunderstanding, disappointment, and silence. The family's discomfort reflects broader social attitudes

towards disability and difference. Children are expected to embody family aspirations and reinforce social respectability. When reality diverges from these expectations, mothers frequently become the focus of anxiety and criticism.

This situation reveals the conditional nature of maternal recognition within patriarchal culture. Motherhood is valued not simply because women nurture and care for children but because it contributes to social continuity and family prestige. When maternal outcomes fail to align with cultural ideals, the value attached to motherhood may diminish significantly. Janaki's experiences therefore expose the extent to which maternal identity remains subject to external evaluation and control.

Adrienne Rich's influential distinction between the experience of motherhood and the institution of motherhood offers further insight into the novel. Rich argues that the institution of motherhood functions to regulate women by defining acceptable forms of behaviour and encouraging self-sacrifice. Women are expected to devote themselves entirely to family responsibilities, often at the expense of personal development. Such expectations limit opportunities for autonomy while simultaneously presenting maternal sacrifice as morally desirable.

Janaki repeatedly confronts these pressures throughout the narrative. Her own aspirations are expected to yield to the demands of caregiving. Educational ambitions, emotional needs, and personal goals appear secondary when compared with maternal responsibility. Yet the novel refuses to accept this hierarchy unquestioningly. Misra demonstrates that caregiving and self-development need not exist in opposition. Instead, Janaki gradually discovers that pursuing education and independence enhances rather than diminishes her ability to care for her daughter.

This aspect of the narrative represents one of Misra's most important feminist interventions. Traditional patriarchal discourse frequently constructs a binary opposition between motherhood and selfhood. Women are encouraged to believe that pursuing personal goals reflects selfishness or neglect. The novel challenges this assumption by illustrating how intellectual growth strengthens Janaki's capacity to advocate for Riya and navigate complex social realities.

Another significant issue concerns the emotional burden associated with motherhood. Feminist scholars have often noted that mothers are expected to perform extensive emotional labour while receiving limited recognition. This labour includes managing anxiety, providing reassurance, anticipating needs, and maintaining emotional stability within the family. Because such work remains largely invisible, its psychological impact is frequently overlooked.

Janaki's experiences exemplify this burden. Caring for Riya requires continuous vigilance, emotional resilience, and adaptability. The challenges associated with disability intensify these demands, placing additional pressure upon a woman already struggling with marital dissatisfaction and social isolation. Yet despite these difficulties, she receives relatively little emotional support from those around her. The expectation that mothers should cope silently reinforces the invisibility of maternal labour and contributes to emotional exhaustion.

The novel also examines the relationship between motherhood and social stigma. Disability remains heavily stigmatised within many communities, often generating feelings of shame and embarrassment. Families may attempt to conceal difference in order to preserve social respectability. Mothers, as primary caregivers, frequently become responsible for managing these social anxieties.

Through Janaki's experiences, Misra critiques this tendency by highlighting the human costs of stigma. Rather than focusing exclusively on social perception, she emphasises the emotional realities of caregiving and the dignity of those whose lives do not conform to conventional expectations. The novel therefore challenges cultural assumptions that equate worth with normality and success.

Significantly, motherhood becomes a catalyst for Janaki's intellectual awakening. The challenges associated with raising Riya encourage her to seek knowledge, develop new skills, and engage critically with institutions that fail to meet her daughter's needs. Education acquires renewed importance because it offers practical tools for understanding and addressing complex situations. Maternal responsibility therefore becomes a source of motivation rather than limitation.

This transformation illustrates a central paradox within the novel. Motherhood initially appears as another mechanism through which patriarchal expectations restrict women's lives. Over time, however, it becomes a force encouraging self-development and resistance. Janaki's commitment to Riya strengthens her determination to pursue education and independence because she recognises that her daughter's future depends partly upon her own capacity for growth and advocacy.

The relationship between oppression and resistance is therefore deeply intertwined. The same maternal responsibilities that increase Janaki's burdens also contribute to her empowerment. Misra does not romanticise this process. The challenges remain real, and the emotional costs are substantial. Nevertheless, the novel demonstrates that women are capable of transforming experiences of constraint into opportunities for self-definition and action.

By the later stages of the narrative, motherhood has acquired a meaning very different from the one initially anticipated. It is no longer simply a role imposed by social expectation. Instead, it becomes a source of strength, awareness, and purpose. Janaki's commitment to her daughter encourages forms of courage and resilience that might otherwise never have emerged. Through motherhood, she develops a deeper understanding of injustice and a stronger determination to challenge the structures contributing to it.

Ultimately, *Ancient Promises* presents motherhood as a complex institution shaped by both oppression and possibility. Misra exposes the reproductive expectations, emotional burdens, and social pressures imposed upon women while simultaneously affirming the transformative potential of maternal experience. Through Janaki's journey, the novel demonstrates that motherhood need not entail the abandonment of selfhood. Instead, it can become a catalyst for intellectual growth, political awareness, and personal resistance. In doing so, *Ancient Promises* offers a nuanced feminist exploration of one of the most significant and contested dimensions of women's lives.

9. Education as Resistance and Self-Reclamation

One of the most significant dimensions of Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises* is its portrayal of education as a transformative force capable of challenging patriarchal authority and restoring a fragmented sense of self. Throughout the novel, Janaki's struggle is not confined to the emotional limitations of marriage alone. It is equally a struggle against intellectual confinement, social dependency, and the gradual erosion of personal identity. While marriage attempts to define her existence through domestic roles and familial obligations, education offers an alternative framework through which she can understand herself as an autonomous individual. Misra presents learning not merely as a means of acquiring qualifications but as a process of self-reclamation that enables women to recover agency, dignity, and independence.

Radical feminist theory has long emphasised the relationship between knowledge and power. Patriarchal systems often maintain control by limiting women's access to intellectual resources, economic opportunities, and independent decision-making. Education challenges these structures because it encourages critical thinking and creates possibilities for self-definition beyond prescribed gender roles. Women who acquire knowledge become better equipped to question social norms, recognise injustice, and imagine alternative futures. Within this context, Janaki's educational journey acquires political significance because it undermines the very foundations upon which patriarchal dependency rests.

At the beginning of the novel, Janaki possesses educational aspirations similar to those of many young women who view learning as a pathway towards opportunity and self-development. However, these aspirations are gradually overshadowed by the demands of marriage. Her transition into the Maraar household reflects a broader social pattern in which women's intellectual ambitions are treated as secondary to domestic responsibilities. Although education is not openly condemned, it is repeatedly postponed, minimised, or subordinated to family expectations. The message remains implicit yet powerful: a woman's primary duty lies within the household, while intellectual development is optional and often expendable.

This interruption of educational aspiration represents a crucial aspect of patriarchal control. By restricting opportunities for learning and self-development, patriarchal systems limit women's ability to achieve independence. Dependence is not merely economic; it is also psychological and intellectual. Individuals who lack opportunities for critical engagement may find it more difficult to challenge established norms because alternative possibilities remain inaccessible. Janaki's early married life illustrates this condition. Her world gradually narrows as domestic responsibilities consume increasing amounts of time and emotional energy.

The atmosphere of the Maraar household contributes significantly to this process. Intellectual curiosity receives little encouragement, while conformity is rewarded more than independent thought. Daily routines revolve around maintaining family structures rather than fostering personal growth. The result is a form of intellectual stagnation that mirrors Janaki's emotional isolation. As her opportunities for learning diminish, so too does her confidence in her own aspirations.

Misra carefully demonstrates that intellectual deprivation carries consequences extending far beyond academic achievement. Education provides more than information; it offers a framework for interpreting experience and understanding one's place in the world. Without such opportunities, individuals may struggle to articulate dissatisfaction or recognise the structural nature of their suffering. Janaki's growing sense of emptiness reflects precisely this condition. She experiences emotional distress but initially lacks the conceptual tools necessary to understand its causes.

The decision to resume her studies therefore marks a decisive turning point within the narrative. At first glance, the choice appears practical and relatively modest. Yet from a feminist perspective, it constitutes an act of resistance. By returning to education, Janaki asserts the legitimacy of her own aspirations and refuses to accept the assumption that intellectual growth should be sacrificed in favour of domestic conformity. Her commitment to learning challenges a system that seeks to define women primarily through service to others.

The significance of this decision becomes clearer when viewed through the lens of self-reclamation. Self-reclamation refers to the process through which individuals recover aspects of identity that have been suppressed, neglected, or denied. Throughout much of her married life, Janaki's sense of self becomes increasingly fragmented. The expectations imposed upon her as wife, daughter-in-law, and mother leave limited space for personal ambition. Education enables her to reconnect with dimensions of herself that existed before marriage and that had gradually been overshadowed by obligation and sacrifice.

Distance learning occupies a particularly important place within this process. Traditional educational pathways often require physical mobility and institutional access, both of which may be difficult for women constrained by domestic responsibilities.

Distance education offers an alternative route, allowing Janaki to pursue intellectual growth without abandoning her caregiving obligations. However, its significance extends beyond convenience. Distance learning symbolises the possibility of creating intellectual space within environments designed to restrict autonomy.

The act of studying from home becomes a subtle yet powerful form of resistance. Every hour devoted to learning challenges assumptions regarding the proper use of women's time and energy. The domestic sphere, traditionally associated with service and obedience, becomes a site of intellectual development and personal transformation. Misra thereby demonstrates that resistance does not always require dramatic confrontation. Sometimes it begins through quiet acts of determination that gradually alter the relationship between individuals and the structures surrounding them.

As Janaki progresses academically, the psychological effects of education become increasingly visible. Success in her studies restores confidence that had been weakened by years of emotional neglect and invalidation. Academic achievement provides tangible evidence of competence and capability. Unlike the approval offered by family members, which often depends upon conformity, educational success is earned through effort and ability. This distinction is crucial because it enables Janaki to develop a sense of worth grounded in personal accomplishment rather than external validation.

The restoration of confidence contributes directly to the recovery of agency. Agency involves the ability to make meaningful decisions and act according to one's own values and aspirations. Patriarchal systems frequently undermine agency by encouraging women to doubt their judgement and prioritise the needs of others above their own. Education counters this process by fostering intellectual independence and critical awareness. As Janaki acquires knowledge, she becomes increasingly capable of evaluating her circumstances and imagining alternatives.

Learning also transforms the way she understands her experiences. Earlier in the narrative, dissatisfaction often appears as a personal failing or emotional weakness. Education introduces new perspectives that reveal the social and structural dimensions of her suffering. She begins to recognise that many of the limitations affecting her life are not inevitable but socially produced. This awareness represents an essential step towards liberation because it shifts responsibility away from the individual and towards the systems generating inequality.

Another important aspect of education within the novel is its relationship to economic independence. Radical feminist theorists have consistently argued that economic dependency reinforces patriarchal power by limiting women's choices and increasing vulnerability to control. Education enhances opportunities for employment and professional development, thereby creating pathways towards financial autonomy. Although economic considerations do not dominate the narrative, they remain an important component of Janaki's transformation. Learning increases her capacity to support herself and her daughter, reducing reliance upon structures that have contributed to her oppression.

The connection between education and motherhood further strengthens the novel's feminist message. Traditional patriarchal ideology often presents caregiving and intellectual ambition as mutually exclusive. Women are encouraged to believe that pursuing personal development reflects selfishness or neglect. Misra challenges this assumption by showing how education enhances Janaki's ability to care for Riya. Knowledge becomes a resource that enables more effective advocacy, informed decision-making, and greater resilience.

This relationship demonstrates that self-development and responsibility need not exist in opposition. On the contrary, intellectual growth may strengthen a woman's capacity to fulfil caregiving roles while simultaneously preserving personal autonomy. The novel therefore rejects binary thinking that forces women to choose between motherhood and selfhood. Education becomes a means of integrating these dimensions rather than sacrificing one for the other.

By the later stages of the narrative, education has evolved from a personal aspiration into the foundation of liberation. The knowledge Janaki acquires influences every aspect of her transformation. It strengthens confidence, encourages critical reflection, expands opportunities, and nurtures independence. Most importantly, it enables her to imagine a future beyond the limitations imposed by marriage and domestic patriarchy.

The prospect of advanced study and professional development represents the culmination of this process. Opportunities that once appeared unattainable become increasingly realistic because education has altered the conditions of possibility. Janaki no longer sees herself solely through the roles assigned by others. She has developed the intellectual resources necessary to define herself according to her own aspirations and values.

Ultimately, *Ancient Promises* presents education as one of the most powerful forms of feminist resistance. Learning challenges dependency, disrupts patriarchal expectations, and creates pathways towards self-definition. Through Janaki's journey, Misra demonstrates that liberation begins not only with external change but also with intellectual awakening. Education becomes the means through which a woman denied recognition gradually reclaims her voice, her confidence, and her future. In doing so, the novel affirms the transformative potential of knowledge and its enduring importance in women's struggles for dignity, autonomy, and freedom.

10. Divorce as Radical Feminist Agency

One of the most powerful and politically significant moments in Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises* is Janaki's decision to seek divorce. Within conventional social narratives, divorce is frequently represented as a personal failure, a disruption of family stability, or an unfortunate consequence of incompatibility. Women who leave marriages often encounter criticism, suspicion, and social stigma because marriage continues to be regarded as a fundamental marker of feminine success and respectability. Radical feminist theory challenges these assumptions by arguing that divorce may function as an act of resistance against oppressive structures that sustain inequality and emotional subordination. Through Janaki's journey, Misra transforms divorce from a symbol of failure into a declaration of selfhood, dignity, and autonomy.

Throughout much of the novel, Janaki attempts to fulfil the expectations imposed upon her as a wife, daughter-in-law, and mother. She adjusts repeatedly, suppresses dissatisfaction, and invests considerable emotional energy in preserving relationships that provide little reciprocity. Her efforts reflect the powerful social conditioning that encourages women to view endurance as virtue and sacrifice as proof of commitment. The expectation that women should tolerate unhappiness for the sake of family harmony remains deeply embedded within patriarchal cultures, making resistance exceptionally difficult.

The significance of Janaki's eventual decision lies in the fact that it emerges after prolonged efforts to save the marriage. She does not reject the institution impulsively, nor does she abandon her responsibilities without reflection. Instead, her decision develops gradually through years of emotional neglect, psychological isolation, and intellectual awakening. This progression is important because it reveals that divorce is not motivated by selfishness or impatience. Rather, it becomes necessary when continued participation in the marriage requires the destruction of selfhood.

Radical feminist theorists have frequently argued that patriarchal institutions maintain power by convincing women that their value depends upon compliance. Marriage occupies a central place within this system because it often functions as the primary source of social legitimacy for women. A married woman is frequently perceived as respectable, responsible, and successful regardless of the quality of the relationship itself. Divorce threatens these assumptions because it exposes the possibility that marriage may not always serve women's interests.

Janaki's decision therefore carries political significance. By refusing to remain within an emotionally oppressive relationship, she challenges the belief that preserving marriage is inherently more important than preserving personal dignity. Her refusal represents a rejection of social narratives that equate female virtue with endurance regardless of emotional cost. In this sense, divorce becomes an act of feminist resistance because it prioritises selfhood over conformity.

The novel repeatedly demonstrates that patriarchal authority depends upon women's willingness to accept unequal conditions as inevitable. Women are encouraged to endure disappointment quietly because resistance threatens social stability and established power relations. Divorce disrupts this logic by refusing cooperation with structures that demand sacrifice without reciprocity. Janaki's departure from the marriage therefore represents a withdrawal of consent from a system that has consistently diminished her emotional and intellectual well-being.

One of the most significant barriers confronting women who seek divorce is social stigma. Patriarchal societies often portray divorced women as irresponsible, selfish, or morally suspect. While men may recover social standing relatively quickly after separation, women frequently face greater scrutiny and judgement. Divorce challenges deeply rooted cultural assumptions concerning femininity, obedience, and family duty. Consequently, women who leave marriages often become targets of criticism precisely because their actions reveal the limitations of the institution itself.

Misra addresses this reality with considerable sensitivity. Janaki is fully aware of the social consequences associated with divorce. She understands that separation may lead to criticism from family members, social exclusion, and uncertainty regarding the future. The decision therefore requires significant courage because it involves confronting not only personal fears but also collective expectations. Her willingness to accept these risks demonstrates the extent of her transformation from compliance towards autonomy.

From a radical feminist perspective, this willingness to challenge social judgement represents a crucial aspect of agency. Agency involves more than the ability to make choices. It also requires the capacity to act despite pressures designed to discourage independent decision-making. Janaki's divorce illustrates precisely this form of agency. She chooses a path that prioritises emotional well-being and personal integrity even when doing so attracts disapproval.

Another important aspect of the novel is its critique of the cultural belief that women must preserve relationships regardless of circumstance. Patriarchal discourse frequently treats marriage as an end in itself, encouraging women to maintain relationships even when those relationships cause harm. The quality of the marriage becomes less important than its continuation. Misra rejects this assumption by demonstrating that endurance alone cannot transform emotional neglect into fulfilment or inequality into partnership.

The emotional realities depicted throughout the novel make it increasingly clear that Janaki's marriage cannot provide the recognition, support, and respect necessary for personal growth. Continuing the relationship would require ongoing suppression of

her aspirations and emotional needs. Divorce therefore becomes a means of protecting rather than destroying life. It creates the possibility of growth by removing the conditions contributing to psychological fragmentation.

The decision to separate also represents a rejection of emotional oppression. For years, Janaki has been expected to tolerate neglect, silence, and invalidation. These experiences have gradually undermined confidence and weakened her sense of identity. By leaving the marriage, she refuses to accept emotional suffering as a normal component of womanhood. The act carries symbolic importance because it challenges cultural narratives that romanticise female sacrifice and encourage women to endure unhappiness in the name of duty.

Education plays a crucial role in enabling this decision. Earlier in the narrative, Janaki often lacks the confidence necessary to challenge existing structures. Her growing intellectual independence gradually alters this situation. Learning provides not only qualifications but also critical awareness. Through education, she develops the ability to analyse her circumstances and recognise patterns of inequality. This awareness strengthens her capacity for independent judgement and reduces reliance upon external validation.

The relationship between education and divorce is therefore deeply interconnected. Intellectual awakening creates the conditions necessary for resistance. Once Janaki begins to understand her experiences as manifestations of broader patriarchal structures, continued submission becomes increasingly difficult. Education enables her to imagine alternatives and evaluate her life according to standards other than social approval. Divorce emerges from this process of intellectual and emotional transformation.

Radical feminist theory often emphasises the political importance of refusal. Refusal involves rejecting expectations that sustain systems of domination. Women who refuse obedience, silence, or self-sacrifice challenge the assumptions underpinning patriarchal authority. Janaki's decision may be understood in precisely these terms. She refuses to continue performing a role that demands the abandonment of personal dignity and self-respect. Her refusal exposes the unequal foundations of the institution and creates space for alternative possibilities.

Importantly, Misra does not portray liberation as immediate or effortless. Divorce does not eliminate uncertainty, nor does it guarantee happiness. The future remains complex and unpredictable. This realism strengthens the feminist significance of the novel because it avoids simplistic narratives in which freedom is achieved through a single decisive action. Liberation requires continuous effort, adaptation, and self-reflection.

Yet despite these challenges, divorce represents a crucial turning point because it restores the possibility of self-definition. Throughout much of the novel, Janaki's identity has been shaped primarily by external expectations. Marriage, family, and social norms dictate the terms through which she understands herself. Separation disrupts this process by creating opportunities to construct an identity based upon personal values and aspirations rather than imposed obligations.

The symbolic importance of this transformation cannot be overstated. Janaki moves from being an object of social regulation to becoming an active participant in shaping her own future. She no longer accepts definitions imposed by others. Instead, she claims the right to determine the course of her life according to her own understanding of dignity and fulfilment. This shift from objectification to self-definition represents one of the central goals of feminist resistance.

Misra's treatment of divorce also contributes significantly to feminist discussions within Indian English literature. Many narratives addressing women's oppression focus primarily on suffering and endurance. *Ancient Promises* extends this tradition by emphasising the possibility of refusal and departure. The novel suggests that resistance may sometimes require leaving structures that cannot be transformed from within. Such a perspective challenges cultural assumptions that prioritise preservation over justice and conformity over autonomy.

Ultimately, *Ancient Promises* presents divorce as a radical feminist act because it rejects the ideological foundations of patriarchal marriage. Janaki's decision is not simply a personal response to unhappiness but a political assertion of selfhood against structures designed to contain and discipline women. Through her refusal to continue sacrificing dignity for social approval, she reclaims agency and creates the conditions necessary for personal liberation. Misra thereby transforms divorce from a symbol of failure into a powerful expression of resistance, demonstrating that freedom often begins when women recognise their right to leave situations that deny their humanity, autonomy, and worth.

11. Reclaiming Selfhood Beyond Marriage

One of the most significant achievements of Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises* is its redefinition of female identity beyond the confines of marriage. Throughout much of the narrative, Janaki's existence is shaped by social structures that attempt to define her according to predetermined roles. She is expected to be a dutiful daughter, an obedient wife, a compliant daughter-in-law, and a self-sacrificing mother. These roles provide social recognition, yet they simultaneously restrict opportunities for independent self-definition. By the conclusion of the novel, however, Janaki emerges as a woman who refuses to measure her worth solely through patriarchal expectations. Her journey towards selfhood represents not merely personal recovery but a profound challenge to cultural assumptions regarding femininity, marriage, and identity.

The concept of selfhood occupies a central place within feminist thought because patriarchal systems frequently deny women the opportunity to exist as autonomous individuals. Women are often encouraged to understand themselves in relation to others rather than as subjects possessing independent aspirations and desires. Their identities become intertwined with caregiving, domestic responsibility, and emotional labour. While these roles may carry significance and value, they become restrictive when they prevent women from developing a sense of self beyond service to others.

Janaki's experiences illustrate this process with remarkable clarity. During the early stages of her marriage, her individuality gradually disappears beneath layers of expectation and obligation. Decisions concerning daily life, family relationships, and future aspirations are influenced heavily by the demands of others. Over time, she begins to lose sight of the person she once imagined becoming. The emotional and psychological consequences of this loss form one of the most important themes within the novel.

The dissolution of her marriage creates an opportunity for reconstruction. Divorce removes the immediate structures through which patriarchal authority had been exercised and opens a space for reflection and self-definition. Importantly, Misra does not portray this transition as simple or instantaneous. The loss of a socially recognised identity often generates uncertainty. Women who leave marriages may find themselves confronting questions regarding belonging, purpose, and social acceptance. Janaki's journey therefore involves not only liberation from oppression but also the challenging task of constructing a new understanding of herself.

This process of reconstruction is significant because it shifts the focus from survival to self-realisation. Earlier in the narrative, much of Janaki's energy is devoted to enduring difficult circumstances and maintaining relationships. After divorce, attention gradually turns towards personal growth and possibility. The change reflects a broader feminist argument that women should be permitted to define themselves according to their own aspirations rather than through roles assigned by society.

Education plays a central role in this transformation. Throughout the novel, learning functions as a means of recovering dimensions of identity that had been suppressed by domestic confinement. Academic achievement restores confidence and encourages independent thinking. More importantly, education provides a language through which Janaki can interpret her experiences and understand the structures that contributed to her suffering.

The relationship between education and selfhood is particularly important because knowledge enables critical reflection. Individuals who understand the social forces shaping their lives are better positioned to challenge them. Janaki's educational journey therefore contributes directly to the development of feminist consciousness. She begins to recognise that many of the difficulties she experienced were not personal failures but consequences of broader systems of inequality. This recognition transforms the way she understands both herself and the world around her.

Autonomy emerges as another crucial dimension of her transformation. Feminist scholars frequently define autonomy as the capacity to make meaningful decisions according to one's own values and aspirations. Patriarchal cultures often limit this capacity by encouraging women to prioritise external expectations over personal desire. Janaki's experiences reflect the gradual recovery of autonomous decision-making. By the later stages of the novel, she possesses the confidence necessary to evaluate situations independently and pursue goals consistent with her own understanding of fulfilment.

Economic and intellectual independence contribute significantly to this process. Dependency frequently restricts freedom because individuals lacking resources may feel compelled to tolerate conditions they would otherwise reject. Education provides access to opportunities that enhance independence and expand possibilities. Through learning and professional development, Janaki acquires the tools necessary to support herself and her daughter without relying upon structures that previously limited her autonomy.

Motherhood remains an important part of this transformation. Significantly, Misra refuses to portray liberation as a rejection of maternal responsibility. Janaki does not achieve selfhood by abandoning her relationship with Riya. Instead, motherhood evolves into a source of strength and purpose that complements rather than undermines personal growth. This representation challenges patriarchal assumptions that force women to choose between caregiving and self-realisation.

The relationship between Janaki and Riya demonstrates that maternal commitment can coexist with independence and ambition. Indeed, many of Janaki's decisions are motivated by a desire to create a better future for her daughter. Motherhood therefore becomes integrated into her sense of self rather than functioning as a barrier to development. This nuanced portrayal distinguishes the novel from narratives that present liberation solely through separation from family responsibilities.

Another important aspect of Janaki's transformation is the emergence of feminist consciousness. Feminist consciousness involves recognising the relationship between personal experience and broader social structures. Individuals develop awareness that private struggles often reflect systemic inequalities rather than isolated personal problems. This awareness encourages critical engagement with institutions that previously appeared natural and inevitable.

Throughout much of her married life, Janaki interprets suffering primarily as a personal burden. Over time, education, reflection, and experience enable her to recognise patterns of inequality operating within marriage, family, and society. The realisation that

her difficulties are connected to larger structures of power strengthens her capacity for resistance. Feminist consciousness therefore functions as both an intellectual achievement and a political awakening.

Janaki's journey may consequently be understood as a model of radical feminist resistance. Radical feminism emphasises the importance of challenging institutions that sustain patriarchal authority rather than merely adapting to them. Janaki's refusal to remain within an emotionally oppressive marriage, her commitment to education, and her determination to construct an independent identity all reflect this principle. Resistance emerges not through dramatic confrontation alone but through sustained efforts to reclaim control over one's life.

Misra's portrayal is particularly effective because it avoids simplistic representations of empowerment. Janaki does not become invulnerable, nor does she escape all difficulties. The future remains uncertain and complex. Such realism enhances the credibility of the narrative by acknowledging that liberation is an ongoing process rather than a final destination. Feminist empowerment involves continuous negotiation with social realities rather than complete escape from them.

The novel also challenges dominant cultural assumptions regarding the relationship between marriage and female fulfilment. Patriarchal ideology often presents marriage as the ultimate source of identity and legitimacy for women. Success is measured according to a woman's ability to maintain relationships and fulfil domestic responsibilities. *Ancient Promises* rejects this framework by demonstrating that marriage alone cannot provide meaning when it requires the suppression of individuality and autonomy.

Instead, Misra proposes a different understanding of fulfilment. True fulfilment emerges through self-knowledge, intellectual growth, meaningful relationships, and the freedom to make independent choices. Marriage may contribute to these goals, but it cannot replace them. Women possess identities that extend beyond their roles within family structures, and those identities deserve recognition and respect.

This redefinition of liberation represents one of the novel's most important contributions to contemporary feminist literature. Liberation is not presented as rebellion for its own sake. Nor is it reduced to economic independence or romantic success. Rather, it is understood as the ability to live authentically according to one's own values and aspirations. Such a conception emphasises dignity, self-respect, and personal agency while acknowledging the importance of relationships and responsibility.

From a broader literary perspective, Janaki's transformation contributes significantly to the tradition of Indian women's writing in English. Like many feminist protagonists before her, she confronts systems that seek to limit female possibility. Yet her journey remains distinctive because of its emphasis on emotional violence, intellectual awakening, and the recovery of selfhood through education. Misra demonstrates that resistance often begins with the recognition that one's life possesses value beyond social expectation and cultural obligation.

Ultimately, *Ancient Promises* presents selfhood as something that must be actively reclaimed rather than passively received. Janaki's journey illustrates the difficulties involved in this process but also affirms its necessity. Through education, reflection, motherhood, and resistance, she reconstructs an identity no longer dependent upon patriarchal approval. The woman who emerges at the end of the novel is not defined by marriage, suffering, or sacrifice. She is defined by her capacity to think independently, act with conviction, and shape her own future. In this sense, Misra's novel offers a powerful feminist vision of liberation grounded in self-definition and autonomy. By moving beyond the boundaries imposed by marriage and reclaiming ownership of her life, Janaki embodies the possibility of transformation that lies at the heart of feminist resistance. Her journey affirms that true freedom begins when women recognise their right to exist as complete individuals rather than as extensions of the roles society assigns to them.

12. Feminist Perspective on Marriage, Identity and Resistance

Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises* presents a compelling exploration of women's lives within patriarchal social structures and offers a powerful feminist critique of the cultural institutions that regulate female identity. Although the novel is centred on the personal experiences of Janaki, its concerns extend beyond individual suffering and enter the broader terrain of gender politics, social conditioning, and women's resistance to patriarchal authority. A feminist reading reveals that Janaki's struggles are not isolated experiences but manifestations of larger systems that shape women's opportunities, aspirations, and self-perceptions.

One of the central concerns of feminist criticism is the relationship between gender and power. Feminist theorists argue that social institutions often operate in ways that privilege male authority while limiting female autonomy. Marriage, family, religion, and cultural traditions frequently function as mechanisms through which women are socialised into roles that emphasise obedience, sacrifice, and dependency. In *Ancient Promises*, Misra demonstrates how these institutions influence Janaki's life long before her marriage begins. Her future is shaped by decisions made collectively by family members who prioritise social expectations over personal desire. The suppression of her relationship with Arjun and the arrangement of her marriage to Suresh Maraar reflect the limited authority granted to women in determining the course of their own lives.

From a feminist perspective, Janaki's marriage illustrates the operation of patriarchy within the domestic sphere. Patriarchy does not merely refer to male dominance but to a social system that distributes power unequally and normalises gender-based hierarchies.

Within the Maraar household, Janaki is expected to adapt continuously to the needs of others. Her role is defined through service, accommodation, and emotional labour. Personal aspirations become secondary to family obligations, and independent thought is often perceived as a challenge to established authority. The household therefore functions as a microcosm of a broader patriarchal society where women's identities are shaped according to expectations imposed by others.

Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as the "Other" provides a useful framework for understanding Janaki's position. Beauvoir argues that patriarchal societies treat men as autonomous subjects while defining women relationally through their connections to men and family structures. Janaki's experiences reflect this condition. She is valued primarily as a wife, daughter-in-law, and mother rather than as an individual possessing independent aspirations. Her identity becomes increasingly tied to roles that require self-sacrifice and compliance. As a result, opportunities for self-definition remain limited, and her personal desires are frequently subordinated to collective expectations.

The novel also engages with feminist concerns regarding emotional labour. Feminist scholars have noted that women are often expected to maintain relationships, manage emotional tensions, and provide support without receiving comparable care in return. Janaki performs this labour continuously throughout her marriage. She attempts to preserve harmony, avoid conflict, and accommodate the emotional needs of family members despite receiving little emotional support herself. Misra exposes the unequal nature of this arrangement by revealing the psychological costs associated with constant emotional giving and limited emotional recognition.

Another important feminist issue explored in the novel is the relationship between marriage and female autonomy. Traditional social narratives frequently present marriage as the ultimate source of fulfilment for women. Feminist criticism challenges this assumption by questioning whether marriage genuinely promotes equality and personal growth. In *Ancient Promises*, marriage becomes a site of restriction rather than fulfilment. Instead of enabling self-development, it gradually erodes Janaki's confidence and limits opportunities for intellectual growth. Misra thereby dismantles the romantic idealisation of marriage and exposes the inequalities hidden beneath its socially celebrated image.

The novel further examines the politics of motherhood from a feminist perspective. Patriarchal societies often define women through their reproductive roles and encourage them to view motherhood as their primary purpose. Adrienne Rich distinguishes between motherhood as a personal relationship and motherhood as a social institution. While the emotional bond between mother and child may be deeply meaningful, the institution of motherhood frequently imposes expectations that limit women's autonomy. Janaki's experiences illustrate this tension. Motherhood initially appears to reinforce traditional gender roles, yet it gradually becomes a source of awareness, resilience, and resistance. Her commitment to Riya motivates her pursuit of education and strengthens her determination to challenge structures that deny dignity and opportunity.

Education occupies a particularly significant place within the novel's feminist vision. Feminist scholars have consistently argued that knowledge plays a vital role in women's liberation because it enables critical awareness and independent thought. Janaki's educational journey represents a process of intellectual awakening through which she begins to question assumptions she had previously accepted. Learning provides more than professional opportunities; it restores confidence, encourages self-reflection, and creates possibilities for self-definition beyond domestic roles. Education therefore functions as a feminist tool of resistance against structures designed to maintain female dependency.

The emergence of feminist consciousness marks a crucial stage in Janaki's transformation. Feminist consciousness develops when women recognise that personal experiences of suffering often reflect broader social inequalities rather than individual failure. Throughout much of the novel, Janaki interprets her unhappiness as a personal burden. Gradually, however, she begins to understand the systemic nature of the constraints affecting her life. This awareness enables her to challenge patriarchal expectations and reject the belief that endurance alone constitutes virtue.

Her decision to seek divorce represents the culmination of this feminist awakening. Divorce is frequently stigmatised because it challenges cultural assumptions regarding marriage and female duty. Yet from a feminist perspective, Janaki's decision constitutes an act of self-preservation and resistance. By refusing to remain within an emotionally oppressive relationship, she rejects the ideological foundations of a system that values female sacrifice more than female well-being. Divorce therefore becomes a political act that asserts a woman's right to dignity, autonomy, and self-determination.

Misra's portrayal of liberation is particularly noteworthy because it avoids simplistic definitions of empowerment. Janaki does not achieve freedom through rebellion alone. Instead, liberation emerges through education, reflection, motherhood, self-awareness, and the gradual recovery of confidence. This nuanced representation reflects contemporary feminist understandings of resistance as an ongoing process rather than a single transformative event.

Ultimately, a feminist reading of *Ancient Promises* reveals the novel as a powerful critique of the structures that regulate women's lives through marriage, domesticity, and cultural expectation. Through Janaki's journey, Misra demonstrates that liberation requires more than escape from oppressive circumstances. It requires the recovery of selfhood, the development of critical awareness, and the courage to define oneself beyond the limitations imposed by patriarchal society. The novel therefore stands as

an important contribution to Indian feminist literature, affirming the transformative potential of education, autonomy, and resistance in women's pursuit of freedom and dignity.

13. Conclusion

Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises* occupies an important place in contemporary Indian English fiction because of its unflinching examination of marriage, patriarchy, emotional oppression, and female resistance. While the novel is frequently approached as a narrative of marital dissatisfaction and personal transformation, the present study has demonstrated that its significance extends far beyond the story of one woman's unhappy relationship. Through Janaki's experiences, Misra offers a sustained critique of the social institutions, cultural expectations, and ideological structures that regulate women's lives and restrict opportunities for autonomy and self-definition. The novel reveals that patriarchy operates not only through visible forms of domination but also through emotional neglect, psychological control, reproductive expectations, and the systematic denial of female individuality.

A central argument of this study has been that marriage functions in the novel as a patriarchal institution rather than merely a personal relationship. The Maraar household serves as a microcosm of a broader social order that values female obedience, adjustment, and sacrifice while discouraging independent thought and self-expression. Janaki's marriage illustrates how women are often expected to subordinate personal aspirations to collective interests and familial expectations. Her emotional needs, educational ambitions, and intellectual desires receive limited recognition because the institution prioritises conformity over fulfilment. Misra thereby dismantles romanticised assumptions surrounding marriage and exposes the unequal power relations concealed beneath cultural ideals of domestic harmony.

The analysis has further shown that emotional violence constitutes one of the novel's most significant concerns. Unlike narratives centred upon physical abuse, *Ancient Promises* focuses on the subtle yet devastating effects of emotional neglect, invalidation, silence, and psychological isolation. Janaki's suffering remains largely invisible because it leaves no physical evidence. Yet its consequences are profound. Emotional deprivation gradually erodes confidence, weakens self-worth, and fragments identity. By foregrounding these experiences, Misra expands feminist discussions of violence and demonstrates that psychological oppression can be as destructive as overt forms of coercion.

Another important finding of this study concerns the relationship between motherhood and patriarchal control. Through Janaki's experiences as Riya's mother, the novel reveals how reproductive expectations shape women's identities and opportunities. Motherhood initially appears as another mechanism through which patriarchal values regulate female behaviour and define social worth. However, Misra complicates this narrative by showing that maternal responsibility can also become a source of strength, awareness, and resistance. Riya's presence encourages Janaki to pursue education, develop resilience, and challenge social assumptions regarding disability, care, and female fulfilment. Motherhood therefore emerges as a site of both oppression and transformation.

The study has also emphasised the crucial role of education in Janaki's journey towards liberation. Education functions not merely as a means of obtaining qualifications but as a process of intellectual awakening and self-reclamation. Through learning, Janaki acquires the confidence necessary to question established norms, analyse her circumstances critically, and imagine alternative possibilities. Education challenges patriarchal dependency by fostering autonomy, self-respect, and independent judgement. Misra presents knowledge as one of the most effective tools available to women seeking to resist structures that limit freedom and opportunity.

Particularly significant is the way in which education contributes to the development of feminist consciousness. As Janaki's intellectual horizons expand, she begins to recognise that her suffering is not the result of personal inadequacy but the consequence of broader social inequalities. This recognition transforms her understanding of herself and strengthens her capacity for resistance. Learning therefore becomes both a personal and political act. It enables women to reclaim authority over their own lives while exposing the structures that seek to deny them agency.

The decision to seek divorce represents the culmination of this process of transformation. From a radical feminist perspective, divorce functions in the novel as an act of resistance rather than a sign of failure. By leaving an emotionally oppressive marriage, Janaki rejects the ideological foundations of a system that demands female endurance while denying emotional fulfilment. Her refusal to continue sacrificing selfhood in the name of social approval constitutes a powerful assertion of dignity and autonomy. Misra thereby challenges cultural narratives that equate female virtue with obedience and demonstrates that liberation sometimes requires withdrawal from institutions that cannot accommodate equality or respect.

A major contribution of *Ancient Promises* lies in its redefinition of selfhood beyond marriage. Patriarchal societies frequently encourage women to derive identity primarily through relationships and domestic roles. Misra contests this assumption by portraying Janaki's gradual reconstruction of an independent sense of self. Education, motherhood, reflection, and resistance all contribute to this process. By the conclusion of the novel, Janaki is no longer defined solely by her status as wife or daughter-in-law. She emerges as an autonomous individual capable of shaping her own future and determining her own worth.

The novel's feminist significance is further strengthened by its rejection of simplistic narratives of empowerment. Misra does not present liberation as immediate or effortless. Janaki's journey is marked by uncertainty, emotional conflict, and difficult choices. Such realism reflects the complexities of women lived experiences and avoids reducing empowerment to a single moment of rebellion. Instead, liberation is portrayed as a gradual process of learning, questioning, resisting, and reconstructing identity. This nuanced understanding aligns closely with contemporary feminist scholarship, which emphasises agency, negotiation, and critical awareness rather than absolute solutions.

Within the broader context of Indian feminist literary discourse, *Ancient Promises* makes a substantial contribution by foregrounding emotional oppression as a central feminist concern. Many discussions of gender inequality focus on visible forms of discrimination and violence. Misra expands this conversation by highlighting the everyday practices through which women are disciplined, silenced, and marginalised. Her exploration of emotional labour, psychological suffering, and intellectual deprivation reveals dimensions of patriarchy that often remain hidden within ordinary family life.

The novel also challenges deeply entrenched cultural assumptions concerning marriage, motherhood, and feminine duty. By questioning institutions traditionally regarded as sacred and unquestionable, Misra encourages readers to reconsider the relationship between social expectation and personal freedom. Her work demonstrates that institutions should not be evaluated solely according to tradition or cultural prestige but according to their capacity to support dignity, equality, and human flourishing.

Ultimately, *Ancient Promises* is a powerful radical feminist critique of marriage as a patriarchal institution that regulates women's bodies, emotions, aspirations, and identities. Through Janaki's journey from compliance to resistance, from silence to self-expression, and from dependency to autonomy, Misra reveals the transformative potential of education, self-awareness, and feminist consciousness. The novel affirms that liberation begins when women refuse to accept definitions imposed by others and claim the right to determine the course of their own lives.

Janaki's transformation stands as a compelling testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the enduring power of selfhood. Her journey demonstrates that resistance may emerge quietly through learning, reflection, and persistence, yet its consequences can be revolutionary. By reclaiming her voice, rejecting emotional oppression, and embracing intellectual freedom, she embodies a vision of feminist empowerment grounded not in conformity but in dignity, autonomy, and self-definition. Through this vision, Jaishree Misra offers a lasting contribution to feminist literature and a profound exploration of what it means for women to live beyond the limitations imposed by patriarchal society.

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