

Janaki in 'Ancient Promises' - A Victim of Family Honour

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Abstract: Even educated women are reluctant to come to the main stream of society. What is holding them back? It's nothing but the patriarchal society which is imposing too many dos and don'ts on them. It suffocates and thereby restrains them from coming forward to achieve their deserved status in the society. My humble attempt is to portray how false sense of family honour stands as an obstacle on the path of women empowerment.

Keywords: Patriarchal society, family reputation, conservative, humiliation.

1. Introduction

Be proud of your family. But if you give undue importance to family honour, it is not healthy. Unfortunately, most Indians are affected by this false sense of family honour. They fail to realise that it reduces individual advancement. The patriarchal society insists that the family honour is rested on the shoulders of women. Hence, it demands modesty and obedience from them. The concept of family honour is restricting women from getting involved in matters which are not desirable in a male-Dominated society. Women should lead a respectable life upholding the family status. That means, she should forget about her individual freedom for the sake of family.

"Women's duties as good daughters, good wives and good mothers are well-defined in the Indian patriarchal society. Wifehood and motherhood are accepted as pivotal roles for women: by implication, these roles complete in themselves and women need not pursue any specialized discipline of knowledge, art or profession. The good woman is sweet, gentle, loving, caring and ever sacrificing. (Desai 1)

In the novel 'Ancient Promises', written by Jaishree Misra, we can notice many instances in which unnecessary importance is given to family reputation. Janaki, the heroine of the novel is a Malayali girl living in Delhi. She falls in love with a Delhi boy named Arjun. But her conservative parents are not in favour of love affairs.

Janaki says; "I'd heard Dad harrumph loudly at love scenes in films, worried they would fill my head with silly notions. Love, for him, had been the stirring in his heart..... he often said." (Misra 23). When Janaki talks about her friendship with Arjun, her mother gives a surprised and alarmed look followed by a number of queries about him. She advises Janaki;

"I never had friends like that when I was growing up. You

have to be careful, you know, there's lot of boys out there who will be only too willing to take advantage of pretty girls." (Misra 24-25). The conservative parents are not willing to change their preconceived notions and accept the modern ways of new generation. After the visit of her friends, including Arjun, to their house, her mother says; "Only I know how long it took to persuade your father it wasn't a bad idea. But never again, okay? We aren't the kind of family that can encourage its girls to have boyfriends." (Misra 26).

"Patriarchy defines the precincts of women and even a slight infringement on their part is insufficient to arouse the wrath of its representatives." (Surendran 85). The society never allows woman to think freely or express her opinions without restrictions. They are bound to follow the system blindly. She is not supposed to realise her potential and demand her independence. Again, mother says; "The reputations of families were carried on the shoulders of their daughters." (Misra 46-47) Later, they shut their eyes to their daughter's love for Arjun and force her to marry Suresh Maraar who is from an immensely rich and reputed family in Kerala. The Maraar family chooses her because "..... they had heard that my family were conservative and traditional." (Misra 53).

Janaki's dislike is ignored and the parents arrange her marriage with Suresh who is a total stranger to her. After marriage, the loveless and indifferent attitude of her husband pains her deeply and she regrets her decision to obey her parents for the sake of family honour. Over burdened by a harassing mother-in-law, Janaki finds it difficult to breathe in the new atmosphere. To make matters worse, a mentally-retarded child, Riya, is born. She tolerates the humiliation and harassment to the maximum for saving the family honour.

The moment she gets a chance for higher studies in England, she escapes. There, she and her lover Arjun live together untouched by the false family honour. After completing her course, she returns to Kerala to get her daughter back from the Maraars. She attempts to get a divorce from Suresh. Maintaining family honour is the responsibility of woman. If she fails in this, it is dishonorable and shameful to the whole family. Janaki's mother is worried about 'what will others think?' She tries to advise her daughter; "No one in the family had ever been divorced before. It just didn't happen in decent families like ours." (Misra 238). Then, the Maraars visit her

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again to persuade her to withdraw divorce petition for saving their family honour. But Janaki is not ready for any compromise and finally she gets her long-cherished dream, her freedom. The novel opens with a note; “My marriage ended today.” (Misra 3)

References

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