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**STRUGGLING WOMEN FOR THEIR OWN IDENTITY IN JAISHREE MISRA'S ANCIENT PROMISES  
AND ANITA DESAI'S CLEAR LIGHT OF THE DAY**

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**ABSTRACT**

The well known Indian women novelist Anita Desai and Jaishree Misra represent the conflict and suffering of the educated women of modern India who struggle between values, tradition and modernity as well as struggling for their own identity and independence. The women protagonists of their novels are ready to fight against the orthodox rituals, tradition and values of society. In Anita Desai's 'Clear Light of the Day' and Jaishree Misra's 'Ancient Promises' portrays the women who are struggling between the tradition and modernity where they are searching for real identity by facing suppression, oppression in their patriarchal domination. The women character of Anita Desai and Jaishree Misra's novels seeks own identity, the status and position like that of men with equal sexuality and rights. For own identity, self discovery, status, position and independence they rebel against society. In this paper authors highlighted and presented the cohesive study of Struggling Women for their own identity in Jaishree Misra's Ancient Promises and Anita Desai's Clear Light of the Day.

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**INTRODUCTION**

In our society today, women are discriminate against in pay, jobs, education and welfare. Most women are financially dependent on a man and without assistance carry the burden of looking after children and caring for the sick and old. In our society women don't have equality, they don't have freedom, and they don't even have respect in any meaningful sense (Acharya and Shanta, 1991). Women have to be able to fight back, for themselves and for the future of all women. This doesn't mean an out and out conflict with all men all of the time (Ashcroft *et al.*, 2002). Women have the right to organize with men to fight against the society that keeps us all down. To make men see that their world has to be changed, but it seems that now the concept as changed and new face of women is emerging after the long journey of seeking own identity, individuality, equality with new spirit, and trying to bring changes through the abolishment of sexist attitudes and patriarchal domination. Critic like Simone De Beauvoir (Beauvoir, Simone de, 1996) states "one is not born but rather become a woman." Only feminists can discover the power of womanhood and establish the importance of them in the male dominated society, that's why woman chooses to rebel and

struggle against the age old traditional values of the society. Gender is more or less a cultural construct. The complex set of values that designate the gender is transferred to us through the socio-cultural activities that get imprinted in the subconscious mind of humans. Many are the attempts made by the writers to come out with a convincing definition of femininity. For Sigmund Freud, "fatality" of the feminine situation is nothing but an atomical "defectiveness" marked by the absence of "transcendental signifier". And for Earnest Jones, this absence is the real essence of femininity. A girl child recognizes this absence at an early stage and this realization becomes the corner stone of her femininity. These male dominated versions are questioned and retorted by the feminist writers, they oppose and attack this absence/presence/essence theory and advocated a new theory of modern women which is neither identifiable by men nor referable to the masculine economy". According to Helene Cixous (Helene and Cixous, 1993) "Women are essentially bisexual, which presents their ability to move from one personality to another". The myth of changeless and unique femininity is transformed by the multiple existences of women. Therefore, K. Meera Bai states, "the word new Women have come to signify the awakening of the women in to a new realization of her place and position in family and society (Helene and Cixous, 1993). Conscious of her individuality, the new women has been trying to assert her rights as a human being and is determine to fight for equal

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treatment with man. Besides this, Sheshadri comments "the new woman is assertive and self-willed searching to discover true self". She does not particularly sought or raises voice of equality of a woman alone but traces more about her space, recognition, respect and understanding from her male counterpart. She also challenges the modern man that she is no more passive and docile but a kind of woman who has potential to change the traditional fancy full thoughts and feelings (Bande and Usha, 1998). Besides this the new woman's eagerness for education and job is mainly to stand as an economically independent figure, to improve woman and to choose a life in a way she wants to fulfill her urges and needs. Neeru Tondon (Tondon and Neeru, 2008) asserts: The 'New Women' today challenges the traditional notions of 'Angel in the House' and 'sexually voracious' image. The new woman is essentially a woman of awareness and consciousness of her low position in the family and society and tries to improve it. Many foreign feminine novelists have also raised their voices in support of this New Women's concept (Tondon and Neeru, 2008).

## MATERIALS AND METHOD

Domestic violence is very well portrayed in one of the novels of Jaishree Misra that is *Afterwards*, where Maya with some of her dialogues explicit that how much she is afraid with her husband and arguments with him. Her husband is over possessive and loves her so much but doesn't give her freedom to talk or to meet with other men. She is not allowed to be social. There is a scene in the novel that there is argument and quarrel between Maya and her husband. This scene clearly shows that women face domestic violence (Ashcroft *et al.*, 2002), (Bhasin Kamla and Khan Said Nighat, 2004).

### Education and Economic Development

Then in one more novel that is *Ancient promises* Jaishree has shown in the first half of the novel that how a girl gets married at the early age of 18 because of the orthodox family, by the pressure of her father. She is not allowed for friendship with boys and all. She belongs to typical south Indian family. Then in the second half of the novel there is a new face of the woman has shown where the leading character Janu gives divorce to her husband and gets remarriage with her ex-lover. It is because of her education and knowledge. She takes her girl child Anjali with her who is mentally challenged and she does not want to grow Anjali in that orthodox atmosphere. She leaves everything for the sake of her daughter. The leading character Janu is well educated girl and bold that's why she takes some bold decisions in the novel (Misra, 2000). Mary Wollstonecraft (Wollstonecraft and Mary, 2009) who is also considered as the "mother of feminism" raises voice for women's education and institution of marriage in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of New Woman is popularized by Henny James (James and Henry, 1963) represented the images of new woman through the female characters, Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* and Daisy Miller in *Daisy Miller* (James and Henry, 2007). Again, in different literary text this new Woman has been reflected and makes an appearance in Maria Edge Worth's *Belinda*, Elizabeth Barrett's *Aurora Light*, Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Henny Arthur Jones's *The Case of Rebellious Suzan*, Shaw's *Mrs.*

Warren's profession and *Candida*. Thus the remarkable Historian Ruth Borden states the new Women refers to a type of woman who has potential to control over her own life either in the personal social or economic. The women's writing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century explores the image of New Women of through the female protagonist who fight against the traditional Victorian culture and the old codes of conduct and morality. They also challenge and oppose the Victorian male perception of woman as angel in the house and the notion of woman's proper places home. Sarah Grand, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy are the writers who went on projecting the images of New Women besides this Charlotte Perkins Gilman refers woman to follow the modern path stretched out by professions and urge to leave the occupation of Home-makers (Kaviraj, 1997), (Misra, 2011). Marx said that socialism is 'the self emancipation of the working class', women, too, can liberate themselves by being part of that struggle. The self-emancipation of women cannot be by a struggle of women' as women; across all classes, because such a struggle would liberate some a lot more than others (Black Naomi, 2004), (Cavallaro and Dani, 2003).

Only by joining forces with the working class can we ever win liberation for all women. It is sometimes said that women have always been oppressed by men, that the antagonism between men and women has its origin deep in human psychology and that the way women suffer in our society is nothing but the same old story that has been going on ever since human life began. Now the change is occurring in the women's sensibility and her attitude is critically discussed. There is no doubt that the women of the modern times are conscious of their self, individuality and existence. They cannot tolerate any kind of injustice done by the male dominated society. The writer raises the question about the consciousness of the Indian women (Chatterjee, 1994). Therefore, novelists like Kamala Markandeya, Jaishree Misra, Anita Desai, Shobha De and Manju Kapur have given the image of new women through their works. Shobha De's heroines are economically independent and they enjoy sexual life not only with their husbands but also with other men. Her female characters lead a completely free life without any restrictions. These qualities are the image of new women according to Shobha De's perspective. Nayantara Sahgal's novels present the emergence of new woman who is no longer considered woman as a sex object but someone who claims to be man's equal partner. The women characters in Shashi Deshpande's novels are caught in the process of redefining and re-discovering their roles and positions in society. She presents the modern Indian womanhood who rebels, rejects and seeks freedom from the traditional norms (Misra, 2010).

### Janaki as a new Woman in Ancient Promises

In *Ancient Promises* Janaki, a Keralite brought up in Delhi falls in love with a north Indian boy Arjun Mehta. When she is a wee wisp of a girl, a teenager. The parents are against at their daughter's unorthodox behavior and object to the relationship. The lovers are prized apart-Arjun goes to England to pursue higher studies and Janaki is brought to Alleppey. Several marriage proposals are discussed and finally a match with the Maraar family is fixed Janaki is terribly upset at the turn of events but she is not bulldozed into a marriage to Suresh.

She thinks over her situation (Misra, 2000). The fact of Arjun's departure was just starting to sink in as something real and permanent. He had gone, not for a month or a year but probably forever. Ma was right; it was crazy to expect we would ever share a future together. We had always occupied different worlds, now it could have been separate universes, and when she writes a letter to Arjun to inform him of her impending wedding, her justifications display a combination of rational thinking and filial loyalty. I'm tired of fighting off my family; they have proven their love for me in the eighteen years it's taken to bring me up. And I just can't believe they would push me into something that would be wrong for me.

I know you think of it as a stupidly blind kind of trust, but there it is (Misra, 2000). Besides, she is given all assurances that she can pursue her studies; there is no compulsion either from her husband or her rather strong willed mother in law to start a family. But for all these advantages, life does not move smoothly for her. Janaki is not whole heartedly accepted into the Maraar family. The reasons are difficult to pin point, the harassment is hardly overt or brutal, and it is in to gain acceptance that Janaki herself decides to put her studies in the back burner and start a family. Perhaps, just perhaps, having a child would solve my problems more easily than a B.A. and a job. I would have a child! She, as their grand child would be loved. Especially if she turned out to be the much longed for first grandson. And, as his mother, I would receive a sort of instant double promotion, so to speak. Be elevated to the position of good mother and good daughter in law. And spin out the rest of my days basking in a kind of reflected glory and blissful motherhood. But things do not go according to plan. Her child, a daughter Riya is detected with learning disability and this defective baby gives the Maraar family a strong reason to be dismissive of the mother daughter duo. Interestingly, it is at this point that Janaki casts off her differential attitude and becomes openly rebellious.

The woman character Janaki in the novel has less of the quality of being gentle, spiritual beings fully devoted to household chores and living as submissive little creatures obeying men's demand satisfactorily. Her staying in the home is depicted by Misra as being 'forced' upon them rather than accepted willingly (Misra, 2010), (Misra, 2007). By providing speech to Janaki Misra has subverted the traditional and masculine form of literature that suppress and ignore female articulations. Women in the past had been mostly portrayed as silent victims. Misra's vision of feminism takes a different perspective and it might still be regarded as in any early stage of development. However, her novels still represent a break from traditional writings. In Misra's novels, her female characters are not satisfied they make attempt to make difference of their life. Janaki never live independently. What she has longed for is love and care and on one in any spatial arena can give her. As Janu wishes to live a solitary and happy life, and she knows all the negative circumstances she is facing should be ended. Misra implies that women in India can never live independently? And then Jaishree gives voice to her lead female character Janaki who thinks after all these incidents to take divorce and study further, and for that she is again criticized in her marital home but she is determinant. She wants to go to England to do a course in Special Education. She started corresponding with the British Council and Delhi.

This quotation shows that Janu leaves her marital home just for the betterment of her child and herself. 'Was it really that bad, moley? Bad enough to leave?' 'No, ma, it wasn't unbearable I could have put up with it for the rest of my life, people suffer much worse things, I know. "But it wasn't good enough, either both for Riya and for me...should it be so terrible just to want something better, Ma? Misra's woman character is powerful. She has done keen observation to craft a character of Janaki. The struggle which Janu faces is more complicated it involves movement from one domestic sphere to another domestic sphere, from her husband's domain to her solitary existence thus, the identity of a woman in India is determined by men and this inherently affects woman's spatial movement.

From the account of Janu's experiences in the novel, we can see them all suffering from various kinds of oppression and suppression in their domestic and marital homes, and she had to made attempts to escape from oppression by living in solitude. Looking at the fate of Janu in the novel, it seems that full liberation which she attained in the novel would not be possible if she doesn't make herself determinant to free herself from that oppressed life. Misra also has shown guts to display Janaki as a powerful woman (Misra, 2000), (Misra, 2004). Jaishree Misra paints the concept of new woman through Janaki who is not a weak and meek character; she has given voice by the writer, so she flees from the oppressive life towards self-determination. She is well educated Delhi girl though she tries to cope-up with the situation at first but after the birth of her own child she realizes that this is not the world of her happiness. We can say that she grabbed another chance to build a tower in the sky (Misra, 2001).

### **Representation of New Woman in clear Light of the Day**

In *Clear Light of the Day* Anita Desai presents Bimla as a new woman. She is confident and courageous to live independently in society. She is an educated woman and teaches history in college. She is the main female protagonist in the novel. Bimla subverts the traditional model of women. She is portrayed as assertive, firm and insistent on ruling others rather than to be ruled. She aims at achieving autonomy and rejects the traditional role and destiny of becoming a wife. She appears to be the only one who can achieve a greater degree of individuality in her lived experiences. "Father never bothered to teach me. For all father cared, I would have grown up illiterate and cooked for my living or swept. So I had to teach myself history and teach myself to teach" (Desai pg.242). In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft voices the right of woman's education. According to her opinion, the most perfect education "is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart (Wollstonecraft and Mary, 2009). Or in other words, to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent." Like her Anita Desai spreads the notion of woman's education through her female character Bimla. - Bimla says to her sister Tara why the Misra girls Jaya and Sarla are so much in hurry to get married instead of going to college. Though the two sisters are already sixteen and seventeen years old yet she insists, they are not educated yet. They haven't any degrees. They should go to college." (Desai pg. 220).

Unlike them her ambition is to live an emotionally and economically independent life. She wants to dress and smoke like man with the desires of full independence and confidence. Therefore, Tondon comments the new woman's eagerness for "education and job have offered her equal opportunity and status to choose a life she wants, travel the world and satisfy her desires." (Desai and Anita, 1977), (Desai and Anita, 1980). The other spatial arena, which can show her power and a place that she can gain recognition, is her school. During her school days, Bimla appears to recover all the vitality and energy away from home. She appears to inherit all the qualities that are only supposed to be male, for example, she is 'the patrol leader' later a Girl Guide, then captain of the netball team, class prefect and the Head Girl'. She can achieve some of the success she wants outside the domestic sphere.

Her intellectual strength shows that she is capable of competing with men in society; this intellectual strength enables her later to get a job and be financially independent. The other reason that she works hard at school is to escape from the sufferings that she seen in other members in her family. The house is filled with disappointment and anxiety over her retarded brother and the hopeless suffering of her mother. All the sufferings that she experiences at home are suppressed and rarely mentioned or discussed among the children. Only her escape to school can help her attain a measure of self-determination and independence (Desai and Anita, 1999), (Ram Atma and Bande Usha, 1984). Another place that she and Tara visit is Lodi Garden but they are not allowed to walk freely there or risk punishment. When they cannot bear the artificiality of the Misra girl's speech to their suitors, they walk to a tomb. The Misra girls are typical Indian Women who stay at home and have all the feminine qualities; they represent traditional values in their acceptance of women's inferior status, a status which Bimla despises. Though Bimla appears to be quite assertive, her role can also be quite contradictory because she takes up the woman's job of looking after the household and other domestic responsibilities. In fact, she is portrayed as quite like a motherly-figure. In patriarchal society, woman is always defined in relation to man.

They are treated as subordinate beings rather than considering a part of human species. So, Anita Desai wants to break the conventional practice of looking at woman as dependable and inferior to man through her protagonist Bimla who ignores to marry with her family doctor, Dr. Bishwas. She wants to break the notion of woman as object or 'other to man', therefore, Somnath Paul states, "the 'other' indicates the peripheral position always occupied by woman within the patriarchal and other masculine's cultures,...this construction of 'women-as-other' is crucially addressed by the concept of New Woman'." (Ram Atma and Bande Usha, 1984), (Ravichandran, 2012). In her adulthood, after Raja and Tara have left her and she remains in the house with only Baba, her half-witted, brother to accompany her, she suffers more from suppression than oppression. This is the result of the distance her brother and sister keep away from her. Bimla is cheated by her selfish sister Tara and brother Raja who married and settled down, leaving behind the responsibilities of Baba, Mira masi and father's business. But she is ready to see them in the light of understanding and forgiveness.

Such qualities of courage and confidence pave the way for fulfilling her ambitions. Therefore, Tara and Bakul realize and comment about her, Bim had found everything she wanted in life. It seemed so incredible that she hadn't had to go anywhere to find it that she had stayed on in the old house taught in the old college, and yet it had given her everything she wanted. Isn't that strange Bakul...she did not find it- she made it. She made what she wanted. (Desai pg.246). This can also be said to be a typical characteristic of Indian feminism. In an interview with Lalita Pandit, Anita Desai claims that the feminist movement in India is very different from the western movement. 'the Indian women is always working towards an adjustment, a compromise...I think Indian feminism is more practical than theoretical.' we may believe that Bim who had sacrificed her ambition and abilities to be "dutiful" is a tragic figure in that she does not comprehend her own wasted potential (Srivastava and Mrinal, 2012), (Tondon and Neeru, 2008). Tara is weak, docile and submissive as compared to Bimla. She appears to have escaped from the sufferings and oppressive atmosphere in her childhood house after her marriage and residence in a foreign land.

She does not have courage to struggle and face the problems and responsibilities of family like her sister. Therefore she is married to Bakul who is much older to her. She receives much attention and care from him which she always craves from her family members at home. After marriage she has lost much of her self-identity and determination and is like an object molded by her husband. Her spatial movement, like all her travels, is not individualistic but accompanied by her husband; even her escape from her domestic home is only the result of her marriage. Hence, we cannot say that she has attained liberation at all from such physical movement away from her domestic home to her marital home in America (Wollstonecraft and Mary, 2009). Her reliance on her husband shows her lack of self-determination. Later on she does not find happiness in following her husband's orders and remains as an obedient wife. Thus she feels that she should stop being submissive to her husband as she seeks for freedom and individuality. Now she realizes that Bim has everything that she doesn't have. Therefore, she asserts, Now, I understand why you do not wish to marry. You have dedicated your life to others to your sick brother and aged aunt and your little brother who will be independent on you all his life. You have sacrificed your own life for them. (Desai pg.154). We can see that both sisters have undergone different experiences in the childhood, adolescent and adulthood. Both have had undergone traumatic experiences in their childhood house and such experiences of the past are always with them. Anita Desai portrays the concept of new woman through Bimla who plays the role of a responsible man and performs manly duties for the family. Being a single woman she breaks the traditional norms and beliefs. She rebels against the general currents of the patriarchal society. She is brave enough to reject the traditional value system and accept the new way of modern life style.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Focusing on Jaishree Misra and Anita Desai's novels, *Ancient Promises* and *Clear Light of the Day*, the interlocking themes that emerge are women's suffering and women's struggle for

emancipation and autonomy in patriarchal society and culture. Their work does not rehearse traditional portrayals of women pleased to fulfill the roles expected of them by patriarchal both in the household and the public domain. We see women are dislocated and displaced in the society and various attempts have been made by them to escape from the undesirable experiences they mostly encounter in the domestic sphere. By reading the outcome of these women characters' struggle for independence, we can say that most of them have experienced various degree of self-determination but they are also haunted by the past memories and are isolated from the community. The novelists assert that women are not merely sex objects or sacrificing people in the family but they are women of substance as well as essence. Both the novels represent a continuity of women's subjection in the patriarchal society and the humiliation and suffering they have to undergo because of their confinement in the domestic sphere. The novels portray the married women's lives and while some dominate over their husbands in the domestic sphere or are able to achieve self-determination. Most of the others are entrapped, exploited and oppressed.

In *Ancient Promises* Jaishree Misra fills the color of new woman through the character of Janaki who rebels against the patriarchal society by breaking the traditional values and norms. On the other hand in *Clear Light of the Day* Anita Desai exposes the conflicts that arise when women try to struggle for independence and self-determination. In order to achieve equality and resolve tension between the genders, the traditional ideological systems that deprive women of their rights should be reviewed. Bimla, who performs manly duties and carries the burdens of family responsibility, therefore Bimla is a significant Indian new woman who breaks the traditional norms and currents and rebel against the general mindset of the patriarchal society. Therefore both the novelists highlight that women have become the embodiments of revolt, not for equality but for the right to be acknowledged as individual with belief in education, financial independence and self fulfillment in society. They should have opportunities to achieve independent social and economic existence both in the public and private domains if equality is to be achieved in society.

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