Theme of Tangled Relationships in the
Select Novels of Jaishree Misra

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Abstract
This article presents the Tangled Relationships in Jaishree Misra’s novels Ancient Promises and Accidents Like Love and Marriage. Gayatri is the protagonist of the novel. As the protagonist belongs to a middle class family, she has to overcome many adverse circumstances in her life. The author presents Gayatri as a new woman and she sees life very seriously. She never cares about the opinions of the society. She is stern in her decision to marry Tarun, whom she falls in love. The author portrays the tangled relationship through the life of Gayatri and Tarun. She also portrays the southy-northy divide and the difference between the upper class family and the middle class family. Misra advises women to overcome each and every accident that crosses their lives and face life boldly.

Keywords: Tangled, Unloving, Lavish, Accident, Madrasi, Disbelief, Courage

Man and woman have their well defined roles in a family. Woman has assumed the role of nurturing the family. The web of family in the traditional Indian society is inter-woven around woman. Marriages are made in heaven and celebrated on earth. It is a special bond shared between two souls to be accompanied for a lifetime. But modern marriage face adverse consequences due to lack of love, understanding, mutual respect, trust, commitment and togetherness. In the words of Woolf:

The modern psychological trends took woman to a new way of thinking so that by this means she could consider herself extra sensible in her Behaviour she came to show keen interest in the affairs of not only the family, but also world outside. This change has resulted in new problems and weaknesses. (5)

Love and marriage create a lot of turmoils in the modern society. Tensions, frustrations and mental strain are consequences of modern marriages. These issues are reflected in Jaishree Misra’s novel Accidents like Love and Marriage (2001).
Accidents like Love and Marriage is a good-natured story of love in Delhi. The novel is divided into fourteen chapters. It is all about accidents like falling in love or getting married or trying to fix incompatible relationships. People involve in these accidents blame themselves for such happenings. They do not understand that as a human being no one can avoid such accidents. There is a good deal of drama and scandal everywhere. The story is based on three families in New Delhi. They are Sachdevs, the Singhs and the Menons, who are the representatives of urban families in India. Like Ancient Promises, Misra’s second novel Accidents like Love and Marriage also revolves around the theme of marriage.

The novel opens with the major characters Rohit and Neena who have been married for exactly five years. Neena is the daughter of Kamalesh and Manpreet who belong to a wealthy singh family and Rohit is the elder son of Jagdish Sachdev and Swarn Sachdev who belong to the wealthy Sachdevs family. Angel describes their life, “the Sachdevs and the Singhs are rich, upper class Punjabis. Their normal folk with everyday concerns, instantly recognizable, in fact, just a little bit like youji and me. Their lives are inter-connected by love and marriage” (35). Rinku is a four years old pretty little daughter and Rilik is a chubby ten-month old baby who are the children of Rohit and Neena.

Jaishree Misra portrays Swarn Sachdev, mother-in-law of Neena as a dominant wife and ruler of the family. She rules the family with iron hand. Through Swarn Sachdev and Jagdish Sachdev, Misra show the tangled relationship between husband and wife. The society sees Swarn Sachdev as an image of a good wife because she pretends as if there is mutual love between her and her husband. She pretends that she is leading a harmonious life. According to Jamna, “Misra tries to flaunt a cheap feminism in the opening pages of the narrative, the wife of Jagadish Sachdev” (317). Swarn does not love her husband. She thinks that he is creating troubles for her. Washing his dirty clothes is detestable to her. Her hatred is thus shown: “The thought of her husband’s dirty laundry filled her with dread, she still endeavoured to have one of the maids pick up all the clothes he threw around when he returned from his factory at the end of the day….She would then send those items that needed to be washed off to the dhobi” (3).

Jagdish Sachdev looks after his business and Swarn concentrates in supervising the servants. Jagdish adjusts with Swarn only because he does not want others to notice that Swarn is an unloving wife. “Supervision and delegation, that was the trick, she often liked to think” (4).

Neena’s brother-in-law that is Sachdev’s son Tarun is not a devoted son. He has a handsome and charming personality with a boyish smile. When Swarn looks back at her life, she would lament for making Tarun a businessman after his father Jagdish Sachdev. Swarn describes “My Rohit and My Tarun were just two innocent boys wanting to enjoy life. But you...you...only wanted to make businessmen out of them. That’s all you have wanted from them” (36). Tarun becomes the managing partner of Sachdev’s Textiles and Exports. He has supervised, negotiated, planned and held conference with his father.
On the other side of Delhi, another group of characters live and Misra reveals class difference through Neena and Gayatri. Gayatri is the friend of Neena and daughter of Menon who belongs to a middle class family. After completing Ph.D from Oxford University, Gayatri returns to India. In Delhi she longs for real love which she has lost for all the years, when she has been away. Misra describes “the Menons lived in Saket,a crowded, bustling housing estate that the Singhss sometimes visited from their nearby sprawling Sainik Farms residence” (19).

The friendship between Neena and Gayatri starts from the college when they join for the degree. Neena visits her friend Gayatri after informing her mother-in-law, Swarn Sachdev. But modern daughters-in-law do not hang around waiting for permission or blessings from elders. Accept, adjust, accommodate are the watch words for today’s mother-in-law “… she nods weakly and takes a deep breath as Neena sweeps out the room in a flurry of some expensive perfume” (50).

When Neena goes to her friend’s house, Raji Menon is busy in cleaning her room. She is conscious that her daughter’s old friend has visited her after so many years. Raji remembers Neena’s lavish wedding. She is not at all pleased with Neena because she is wealthy. She feels that it is a good thing that Neena has got married soon after graduation as she belongs to a wealthy singh family. To Gayatri education is the only gift her parents could confer on her. This shows the difference between upper class family and middle class family. Angel describes thus:

The older women in the book are seemingly obese, and petty minded, and their sole motive in life is to go one up on their ‘friends’ or scheme and plot their son’s marriage over endless cups of “chai” and “pokoras”, while the men are all caught up in their business and are totally incompatible with their wives. The daughters are exceedingly pretty, and alternate between extremely silly and highly intelligence, while the sons are all handsome Casanovas. (35-36)

Marriage plays a crucial factor in every woman’s life. “Girls in her time, and in the small town of varkala where she had grown up had never been encouraged to think too hard for themselves” (54). Ravi is worried about Gayatri because it is time for Gayatri’s marriage. But contrary to her parent’s wishes, Gayatri is not interested in anybody. She has returned to India with marriage far from her mind. Neena and Gayatri converse for long time. Gayatri confides in Neena about the Englishman she has met and his memory still makes her fall in a state of confusion and pain. She accidentally falls in for an English guy Michael in London. But soon she realizes that he is a married man. Gayatri describes Michael:

… Michael, whose dark grey eyes had seemed so intriguing once. Eyes that had once seemed so fascinatingly to reflect the brooding uncertainty of English skies…It was with those same eyes that he had later looked at her so coldly…she remembers, despite the state of bewilderment she found herself in that awful day, how like cold, dirty ice they had looked, sharp and jagged and merciless. (59)

Love meets with accident in the life of Michael and Gayatri and their relationship ends. Misra portrays Gayatri as a courageous woman and she has the power to face life bold even after her love failure.
The incompatiable relationship between Tarun and Gayatri comes to an end. Gayatri’s family put an end to their relationship. The novel finally explores philosophical statement through Raji Menon as “after all, Gayatri is still relatively young…she will find someone who will be more suitable, both for her and for us” (204-05).

The protagonist of the novel Gayatri is responsible for the twists and turns in the novel. The author herself says in the novel about the arrival of misfortune in the Sachdev family thus, “Everything, just about everything was going to unhitch itself from its normal moorings and flood into unknown waters. What the Sachdev were drifting so inexorably towards was uncharted territory, the foreign, the unfamiliar” (5-6). As a strong woman, she has her opinions for anything and everything including the selection of her life partner. She does not want others to call her Madrasi. She prefers to be called Malayalee.

Misra does not allow any of the female characters to lose courage. Through the character Raji Menon the novelist speaks that Gayatri will soon meet someone more compatible than Tarun and Tarun too will find someone who uses words less long to make his own life easier. But the author is still in dilemma about the feelings of Gayatri. She is ruining her “above-average good look with floods of tears as she lies on her old bed” (205). It is hard to tell who it is she is crying for Tarun-Michael. The man she cannot seem to find the general state of her love life. What she does know is that despite a Ph.D. from Oxford and the job of professor of English, Department of Humanities, Jawaharlal Nehru University, it is still a blooming love life that she seems to crave for. She almost cannot believe her own stupidity, her own pusillanimity. She remembers the past with Tarun with tearful eyes. But she is assertive in her attitude to life.

A love game starts by the visit of Gayatri to Sachdev’s family. The author presents the transformation in Tarun. He is a businessman and is hard at work. But Cupid plays in Tarun’s life. He is deeply interested in Gayatri and takes Neena for his support. Though Tarun is a businessman, his love towards Gayatri changes him into a poet. When Tarun sees Gayatri for the first time, he is exhilarated. He compares her to a water lily. “He sees a laughing profile, a creamy brown neck and that tiny earlobe. Anais has never smelt so heavenly before, transforming this ornate and really rather garish drawing room into a perfumed bower” (74).

The tug of war starts in Sachdev’s family. Swarn Sachdev, mother-in-law of Neena never wants to accept a middle class Madrasi girl for her sweet son Tarun. She does not like Gayatri especially because she is a South Indian. She says that “Madrasi! I have no time for Madrasis! Funny blacky people who say aiyoo aiyoo and make a mess eating sambar idlis!” (131). Swarn does not accept Gayatri as her daughter-in-law because she is not a Sachdev or not even a Punjabi. She is not demure, homely and not very fashionable. She is a foreign returned with all sorts of godforsaken foreign ideas. Above all she is Neena’s friend. Jamna points out, “The younger son Tarun is head over heels in love with Gayatri Menon, an intelligent girl with a Ph.D from Oxford, but despised by Swarun, simply because of her middle-class origin. Marriage! To that Madrasi girl? Over the dead body shouted by Sworn” (318).
Swarn Sachdev has a good opinion about Neena’s mother Kammy Singh. She says “Wearing trousers at age forty-five and going into villages to teach village women how to divorce their men” (7). The characters in the novel expose the fact that in Indian family, relationship is important. According to Gaur “…Indian woman has to struggle against the insensitive fatality of options and the indoctrination of centuries” (67). Kammy Singh boasts about her non-governmental organization which she has set up twelve years ago is to help the poor people in Gujarat who is in need of tents and medicines. Manny Singh thinks that Kammy’s work is just a wastage of money. He says “how much of my hard-earned money is poured into this seva-seva thing. I just don’t know” (24).

As a sensible woman and a pragmatist, Swarn does not want to lose her son’s affection. But her hatred towards Menon’s family gives intolerable pain to Gayatri and her family. Misra pictures an elaborate description of Menon’s visit. Keshava Menon, father of Gayatri is inferior even in his way of dressing. He has nothing decent to wear on his visit to the Sachdev household” (173)

The novel presents the humiliation of Menon’s family in Sachdev household. Jagdish congratulates Gayatri for taking up a teaching post at the Indira Gandhi University. But she is at the Jawaharlal Nehru University. When Swarn makes her entry into the drawing room:

She is clad in white, the colour of mourning. There are dark hollows around her eyes, visible today only because she has not bothered to hide them with her usual foundation make-up. Her eyes are focussed somewhere beyond the walls of her drawing room, in search of some distant place where there is only peace. (182)

She comes to meet the people in the assembled gathering because she has been brought up by her parents to always be gracious and polite to people. Her attitude proves that she belongs to a high class family.

The relationship between master and servant too is tangled. Moolchand, the cook, has great love and respect for Swarn Sachdev even at the age of sixty-seven thought he is not allowed to rest or sleep peacefully. He always supports his Memsahib. Moolchand brings a large tray with tea. He is instructed by Tarun “to make cheese pakoras and to get some burfis from the nearby halvai” (184). It is the Memsahib who pays salary to Moolchand. So naturally he obeys his Memsahib. Tarun asks the cook:

Are the pakoras coming? He asks Moolchand, hissing threateningly in Hindi. Moolchand looks down and shuffler his feet to indicate a negative. He tries to slip back to the kitchen…And where are the burfis? Tarun asks, his face turning dark with anger as he realizes there are none. Moolchand attempts a quick backward shuffle out of the drawing room, but Tarun is too swift for him. (184)
Another example of tangled relationship is shown through the love of Rohit and Tracy. While Rohit visits London for a business meet, Rohit falls into the hands of Tracy. Tracy meets Rohit at the airport and she genuinely feels for him. Tracy’s history is not good. Her full name is Ms Tracy Budd born in London’s East End. Due to her bad behaviour, she is a drop out from the school. Later she becomes a photographer’s assistant. Jamna comments “Rohit presented as a meek husband to the rich wife Neena, daughter of affluent parents Kamalesh and Manpareet, reduced to disyllabic kammy and many” (318). Though he is in the company of Tray, he pretends to neena through phone call that his flat on Edgware Road is very comfortable even with coffee making facilities. He also calls his father and informs his meeting with A & G Group, while he is waiting for Tracy in the flat. Finally he sets out to explore London with Tracy. Through he is aware that the possibility of being spotted with Tracy can create problems in his conjugal life. 

Rohit is a good husband to his wife and a devoted father to his children. Some businessmen have devils in their mind. Rohit, a businessman changes a lot because of his relationship with Tracy. Swarn and Jagdish are proud of Rohit being a successful businessman. According to Jamna, “The “impending doom” predicted at the beginning of the narrative takes the form of a love affair between Rohit and a “firangi, a white woman” in England. Jagdish is ashamed of his sons and irritated at his unloving wife. The narrative culminates in his desertion of his wife and home” (318). The news about the relationship between Tracy and Rohit reaches Neena. While Neena attends the call from Tracy, she and her father-in-law known about the relationships between Rohit and Tracy in London. Swarn is unaware of this relationship between Rohit and Tracy because she is still in a state of disbelief about her younger son Tarun’s antics.

The reason for Neena to marry Rohit is that she is the “daughter of an equally wealthy Delhi business family” (6). Kamelesh, the father of Neena has sugar mills and other businesses. Both Sachdevs and Singh are equally interested in Rohit and Neena. But in their life there is no mutual understanding leads to the disaster in the family. Neena wants Rohit to be a romantic husband, who will always listen to her. Rohit actually does not love Neena. The prospect of married life in a joint family has not been entirely desirable as far as Neena is concerned. 

All the three families meet with accidents in their lives. Their accidents are inter-connected. Through tangled relationships Misra portrays the ruin of the whole Sachdev family. Gayatri is a pure feminist in the novel because though she meets with accidents, she has the courage to overcome the accidents. She has got the naturalness and the ability to control and handle the situation. Through the characters Misra reveals not only tangled relationships but also the emotional alienation between spouses. It creates rift in the relationship and finally leads to conjugal collapse.

According to Misra, solving problems of life is the most important factor in one’s life rather than meeting with accidents. Through Gayatri, the novelist underscores that relationships may break but a woman should have the courage to live independently and assertively.
Misra satirises the life styles of the rich Punjabi’s who lavish and show their hatred to the South Indians. Also the novel reveals that class difference between families may destroy them. Misra, as an Indian English novelist lays bare the problems in families and believes in having amicable relationship with one another.

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