

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

THE NEW ASSERTIVE WOMAN IN JAISHREE MISRA'S
"ACCIDENTS LIKE LOVE AND MARRIAGE"

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Article Received: 09/1/2022
Article Accepted: 30/01/2022
Published online: 03/02/2022
DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.10.1.84](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.10.1.84)

Abstract

Jaishree Misra is a contemporary Indian English writer who has effectively articulated the woman situation in her novels. She has attained remarkable and considerable place among the modern Indian English women novelists due to her new and innovatory thematic concerns and touch on her works with feminine sensibility. She has written about modern contemporary women, their struggles and dilemmas against the context of contemporary India. She does not depict her women characters as slaves or just helpmates at home. She depicts women who are independent, assertive and even defiant. Thus, the female protagonists of Jaishree Misra, the 'new women' in a sense, are capable to unshackle themselves from social barriers and restrictions. They are 'new women' who seek self-fulfilment through self-expression. This article aims to explore how Neena, the chief protagonist of Jaishree Misra's *Accidents Like Love and Marriage* struggles to emancipate herself and emerges as a 'new woman'.

Keywords: New woman, self- fulfilment, self expression

Accidents Like Love and Marriage is Jaishree Misra's second novel published by Penguin India in 2001. This novel is "an unexpected romp through the universal dilemmas of love and marriage" (Misra, "An Interview"). It is a story spun around love, heartbreak and marriage in an Indian setting. A study of Jaishree Misra's novels shows that she takes interest in unveiling the inner world rather than the outer world. The most recurrent theme in her novels is human relationship particularly the follies and foibles of man-woman relationship. The unique and distinct contribution of Jaishree Misra lies in her portrayal of women characters, particularly their relations with men, their drives and responses. She

has endeavoured to look on to things essentially from a woman's point of view.

In *Accidents Like Love and Marriage*, Jaishree Misra unveils the moving story of the protagonist Neena who nurtures herself to ascertain her identity marching towards the epitome of self-esteem. She realises her need to triumph over her oppression in order to assert the power of her individual female self in an androcentric society. Neena realises, reflects, and attains the milestone of self-esteem that she truly deserves.

Neena is the daughter of wealthy Singh family. She is married to Rohit Sachdev, elder son of

an equally wealthy Delhi business family. Their marriage is an outcome of a business deal between both the parties. Neena does not cherish the idea of a joint family. But, as it is an alliance from an equally successful business family, she enters the wedlock. As she herself knows, "The Sachdevs lived in a large house, and she had reasonably expected to occupy a whole wing of it with just her Rohit" (*Accidents Like Love and Marriage* 9). Neena says "yes" to Rohit's alliance. She also likes Rohit as he has a "Thrilling resemblance to Imran Khan" (*ALLM* 9). She decides her life and selects her life partner purely based on external appearance and financial status.

If Janaki in *Ancient Promises* could be spotted as a young and docile daughter-in-law, Neena is a modern daughter-in-law. She does not want to stick to the conventional codes of a daughter-in-law. Traditionally, a woman is expected to give in her personal interests for the sake of the other members of the family, she has to fulfil her partner ahead of her own interests, she should not be rebellious to the established norms and the social patterns and above all she should devote herself always for the sake of the family's honour or its social status. She should look after every member of the family and should do household chores and should never take care of her own interests. An element of control is continuously exercised on the female folk. She is not expected to have privacy for her. On the contrary to this norm, Neena passes most of her time either in her own room or at her parents. Neena likes to enjoy her own space. She prefers to relish her own life. This irritates Swarn, her mother-in-law. In the author's words:

The amount of time that Neena spends in her upstairs quarters has been another of Swarn's secret bugbears. She carefully calculates every day the amount of time that Neena spends downstairs, taking out the time for eating meals and the fifteen minutes when Rohit comes in from work and has a cup of tea before going up to change. It is an average of less than half an hour. Unless Rohit is around, of course, as on Sundays or holidays. He, good son that he is, makes it a point to spend time with his father and his mother, and then, of course, Neena hangs

around as well. Swarn thinks she ought to tell Neena some day that it is not that she doesn't notice any of these things. She is just too decent to say anything and make a great big fuss. (*ALLM* 64)

Swarn does not seem to have a good relationship with her daughter-in-law, Neena. She is jealous of her as she has occupied a major part of her son Rohit's life. She feels happy when Rohit and Neena fight. As the author puts it into the words, "Every so often Swarn likes to remind Neena, ever so subtly, that the mother-son relationship is one that cannot be broken, unlike the husband- wife one. Blood, you see, is much, much thicker than water" (*ALLM* 68). Swarn is not pleased with her daughter-in-law, because she thinks she is too modern to revere her mother-in-law. In one telling incident, when Neena's decision to visit her best friend Gayatri's house comes as a piece of information and not a modest way of seeking permission Swarn realizes, "Modern-day daughters-in-law... do not hang around waiting for permission or blessings as they did in her day. Now one just has to accept, she thinks wearily. Accept, adjust, accommodate- the mantra for today's mother-in-law" (50). Neena is not shy retiring type woman. Swarn is not also satisfied with Neena's way of dressing. She wonders, "Why Neena is wearing something so strange and tight... Daughter in law did not just announce their departures and up and leave like that, moreover wearing such strange, tight clothes! These days men were such idiots, allowing their wives to wear stupid clothes and go off wherever they wanted with no questions asked" (50). As a typical mother-in-law Swarn too expects or consciously wishes her son exercise his power on his wife and keep her under his domination.

Neena is pretty, young and fashionable. Every man, no matter if he is wealthy or poor, longs for a wife who is young, attractive, adjustable and educated. When a man possesses such a woman, it is a mark of his power and prestige. Men generally wish to see their wives as charming, pretty, biddable dolls that must be kept safely in their homes. Neena is the cutie pie of Rohit. Rohit is caring and loving towards his wife. The author describes, "To his credit, Rohit never did see the young collegian again

and was soon quite deeply in love with his wife, the fashionable, preety, young Neena" (6).

Right from her marriage, Neena has been a content wife who is able to build a relationship of real warmth and friendship with Rohit. They genuinely like each other amuse and comfort one another. Rohit is a busy businessman. But he has his time for his wife. He prefers to spend his time with Neena. The author describes, "Rohit drove his father to the factory every morning, but he returned in the early evening to take his pretty young wife shopping or to the cinema and ice cream parlour" (9). He is the perfect man for her. He is emotionally attentive, a dynamo at fixing things around the house, ambitious, funny and caring. He even laughs at her jokes. He is considerate and always tries to provide an emotional support to Neena. Rohit expresses great concern towards Neena in the beginning of their relationship, he reflects the man of modern age who is admitting the equality of woman with man.

When a marriage is new, it's exciting; it's full of joy, hope and happiness. A husband and a wife have positive attitudes toward each other and toward life in general. The excitement of creating a new life together provides men and women the courage to make a covenant marriage commitment, "To love and to cherish, in sickness and in health, in poverty and in wealth, so long as we both shall live" (Chapman 21). But unfortunately marriage is not a lifelong springtime. In marriage, there are ups and downs and backs and forth's that carry on. It is all a part of life. Relationships go up and down while love comes and goes. Most relationships begin with a vibrant love, but soon fade into utter discontent. The husband and the wife look heavenly in the first few months of their new bond. Soon, when they discover each other's true self and when one tries to control the other, staying reluctant to sacrifice one's ego, their love gradually lessens and is totally lost. This is exactly what happens in the case of Neena and Rohit. The roles of husband and wife are differentiated. The husband plays an active role geared towards attaining success at work so as to provide for the family financially. The wife has a sensitive role, which is centred on primary socialization of children and meeting the family's emotional needs.

Rohit is a well to do businessman, practical, stooped with the responsibilities of life that he takes so seriously. He considers himself a dutiful provider of the family. And Neena is taking up the three significant roles of a wife, mother and daughter-in-law. They have their two children Rinku and Ritik. Though "Neena, who had never even looked at a 'dhobi's account' or been anywhere near a stove" (ALLM 8) has to do everything in the household. She is weighed down by her duties. Day by day Rohit engages himself fully to his family business. He has to travel a lot for business purpose. Her frustration grows as Rohit stay focused on his business and is not ready to share his daily workplace happenings with her. Neena, on the other end, is not capable to pay her full and wholesome attention on Rohit, particularly after the birth of two kids. Neena complains, "They are taking up all of my time, those too, Mamma. Even Rohit is not helping as much as he used to... He used to spend at least the evenings with them before. Now he is too busy for anything. He comes home so late from factory. Everyday" (66).

It is a commonly accepted fact that motherhood always creates an abundant joy and happiness. The birth of a child has every possibility of enhancing the intimacy of the couple. The one crucial role that a woman takes up is motherhood and it is thought to be the second birth for a woman. Surprisingly, motherhood leads Neena to disappointment. She constantly curses her children for having gained big hips. She says, "It's terrible, isn't it-the price one has to pay for having kids" (ALLM 46). Women of the earlier generation gave up their career for the sake of their own children. They hardly bothered about their self development. But, women of the present generation are already dissatisfied with such kind of self-sacrifice. After the arrival of two kids, Neena has lost her slim hips. She says, "I hadn't realized how much weight I'd put on, Rohit, with the two pregnancies. Damn those kids. Look at my bum!" (46). Neena admits that all emotive whimsicalities had ceased since the birth of two kids and refers to the distance her husband has been coldly maintaining with her.

An adjustment to another person in marriage is very complex, even if it's a kid. A man may yearn for the old days, or feel envious about the loving

bond his wife and child have forged. He finds himself in competition with his own child for the love and attention of his wife, the mother of his own child. This presumed neglect, even in favour of something as worthy as a child, can take its toll, leaving the man frustrated and disappointed.

Though Rohit was caring and loving towards his wife, he begins to lose interest in Neena. He indulges in an extra marital affair with a white woman Tracy during his foreign visits for business. When Neena witnesses a bolt from the blue and comes to know the true colour of her husband, her world shatters. The author describes, "Neena enters the room, red faced. She is brandishing Rohit's mobile phone in her hand. 'For you', she says icily. 'Some woman called Tracy. Says you stayed with her in London'" (ALLM 199). Neena, who cherished genuine love and faith on Rohit, experiences great shock and mental torture when she becomes aware of her husband's illicit relationships. It pulls Neena into the zone of alienation.

Adulterous affairs of the husband may sometimes be due to the wife herself, who pushes him to infidelity by nonstop nagging or not gratifying his sexual needs, and at times by totally neglecting him. If a wife is aloof of her husband's sexual overtures, he may look for greener pastures elsewhere to satisfy his needs. If the husband is neglected or is taken for granted by his wife, he becomes upset and goes to some other woman as a retaliatory measure. The excuse Rohit gives himself to an extra-marital affair is that "His wife, has been awfully preoccupied... it has been months since she has even had a proper conversation with him" (137). Neena's dream of a happy married life is shattered. All the romance and fantasy at once crush to disillusion. She faces the realities of woman's life and understands fully the fallacy of her fantasies.

Neena is now conscious of the brittle nature of her marriage. When she married Rohit, she had believed that she was passing from the embrace of protection from her parents to the embrace of love from her husband. Instead, Rohit betrays her and gives her only pain. She gradually realizes that her marriage to Rohit is not mere accident but it is a trap and a cage where emotional stress haunts her

through lack of care, bondage and love. She comes to know that she is enmeshed in a decaying marital relationship. The effects of the bitter experiences have undergone by her make her matured human being. She no longer wants to remain cocooned within her world of imagination. No longer does she want to take shelter under the soothing comforts of dream. Rather, she exerts the mental strength to confront reality as it and wants to determine her own course of life according to her own wish. Neena does not want to stay with her treacherous husband. The author describes:

For, if we were to return at this point in time to Sachdev Mansions, we would find a crimson-faced, weeping Neena, wiping tears and snot off her face with the back of her hand, throwing clothes willy-nilly into a suitcase. She is leaving. For good! This is it! Why does she have to put up with all this nonsense when her parents will have her back any time,... And maybe she can finally go off and do a Ph.D. or something. Something for herself for a change. (206)

Jaishree Misra's protagonists are liberated women, they are educated and able to live independently they do not depend on men. As a liberated woman Neena doesn't remain silent but fights for injustice done to her. It is when her ego splinters to pieces, her self-esteem surfaces. She identifies her power within and moulds her 'self.' The realisation of 'self' motivates her to attain self-esteem. With the aroused consciousness of the self in her, Neena does not want to compromise with the extra marital affairs of Rohit. She shows her mental strength when she decides to move away from her husband. She remains stubborn in her decision which is evident from the following dialogue:

NEENA: 'I am leaving.'

ROHIT: 'You are not leaving'

ROHIT (angrily, because he has to take it out on someone): 'Yes, what a time to choose to come strolling back in, hanh?'

NEENA: 'Well, I'm telling you now, I'm not coming back.'

ROHIT: 'Darling, of course you'll come back. How far can you go without me?'

NEENA: 'Just you wait and see, sonny! Ha!' (210).

Neena exhibits her self-respect and doesn't want to depend on Rohit. This 'new' Neena is bold and dynamic who wants to live her life as she desires. She is now ready to move out of Rohit's life, house, and everything. Finally she moves back to her home. She has shattered the clutches of male domination and has come out of it only to assert herself and emerges as 'New Woman'. Usha Bande and Atma Ram elaborate about New woman "Broadly speaking, the 'new woman' is one who, shorn of her 'feminine mystique', is aware of herself as an individual, she is free from her traditional, social and moral constrictions and is able to live with heightened sense of dignity, and individuality" (14). K. Meera Bai also observes, "The word 'New Woman' has come to signify the awakening of woman in to a new realization of place and position in family and society. Conscious of her individuality, the new woman has been trying to assert her rights as a human being and is determined to fight for equal treatment with man" (Qtd. in Shrivastava 15-16).

Neena doesn't cry for her failed marital life. Rather, she dares to question the injustice done to her. She is modern and educated. As a 'New Woman' she delves into her inner world of strength and liberation and craves a niche for herself. Ellen E. Jordan enunciates, "The English feminists endowed the new women with her hostility to men, her questioning of marriage, her determination to escape from the restrictions of home life and her belief that education could make a woman capable of leading a financially self-sufficient, single and yet fulfilling life" (19).

Neena is no more afraid of the male thumb rule. It is as if she has taken the scepter in her hand to rule the world. She is "Conscious, resourceful, confident, dynamic, at times even aggressive, busy re-defining herself, acquiring a new identity, and dealing with the world around on her own terms" (Chandra 14). It is rightly said, "In a patriarchal male-dominated society, it is the male who shouts, hurls, abuses, bullies, reproaches, criticizes and it is the

woman who listens, tolerates and remains passive" (Swain 141). But Neena is different. She is not mere binding vine, 'yes-persons' to bow down in meek subordination. She is a self-assured woman who fights back, resists and shouts back. Jaishree Misra has been successful in portraying a 'New Woman' in the name of Neena, a bold woman, who is independent inwardly and self-reliant outwardly, has crossed over the patriarchal threshold in pursuit of individual freedom, an identity of her own, happiness and self-fulfilment.

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