

Re-assessing the Kerala Model Woman in Fiction: An Interview with Jaishree Misra¹

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Kerala evokes certain stock responses like “very progressive state,” “100% literacy,” “green and beautiful,” “repository of Ayurveda,” “progressive and liberated women” and “women-dominated society.” The Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, in his book *On Economic Inequality* (1973), has pointed out that the “developmental experience” and transformation of post-independence Kerala is a riddle for achieving indicators of social development that are comparable to those of the so-called First World countries. The State of

Kerala in South-western India stands apart from other states in India and nations in South Asia for its rather unusual development. This development includes a fertility rate at replacement level, India’s lowest birth-rate, lowest infant mortality, highest age of marriage and longest lifespan. Furthermore, Kerala’s literacy rate extends beyond 90%. These factors, among others, point to a unique type of development that has been studied by economists, environmentalists, political scientists and anthropologists as “The Kerala Model.”

The identity of the Malayali (or Keralite) women has always been seen from the perspective of the historical matrilineal past. More than 50% of the

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communities in Kerala, including the Nairs, practiced matriliney which empowered women through their unique right to property. Their permanent and uncontested right to stay in their natal homes even after marriage, saved many women from atrocities and problems related to dowry. This unique social practice conferred her certain privileges when compared to women from northern parts of India where societies were largely patrilineal in nature. However, in spite of the economic and social empowerment granted to Kerala women in the olden days, today Kerala is ranked the second highest (the highest being Rajasthan) in the number of recorded cases of domestic violence against women. This statistic seems quite paradoxical when compared to the representations of women in popular culture and literature. This huge disparity between reality and representation both in print and media drew my attention to author Jaishree Misra (1961-), whose works like *Ancient Promises* (2000) and *Afterwards* (2004) are set in the socio-cultural fabric of Kerala. Her novel *Ancient Promises* is a semi-autobiographical novel which revolves around the life of a Delhi-born Malayali girl Janu – her conservative upbringing, her teenage love and finally an arranged marriage to a Kerala-settled boy. The coldness of her husband's family and the husband's indifference to the wife and their daughter's needs finally result in a divorce. She flees Kerala and subsequently reunites with her teenage heart-throb Arjun in London. Similarly her novel *Afterwards*, largely set against a Kerala backdrop, tells the story of a beautiful housewife Maya who suffocates under the weight of a loveless marriage and a suspicious husband. She falls headlong in love with her neighbour, Rahul Tiwari, and escapes to London with him. Misra's other novel, *Accidents Like Love and Marriage* (2003), set in Delhi, deals with a stereotypical north India-south India encounter, reflected by an urban intellectual Malayali family, the Menons, and the nouveau-riche Punjabi family, the Sachdevas. Misra has four more works of fiction to her credit, including *Rani* (2008), *Secrets and Lies* (2009), *Secrets and Sins* (2010), *Scandalous Secret* (2011), and a collection of poems titled, *The Little Book of Romance* (2001).

Fiction acts as a gateway to a literary artist's perception of the social reality around him/her. Jaishree Misra's works act as a mirror to the social reality which is constantly negotiated and re-imagined. It is very interesting to see her representations of Malayali women as well as her response to the older cultural practices of the Nair community in novels such as *Ancient Promises* and *Afterwards*.

Jaishree Misra was born and brought up in New Delhi. She has a Master's degree in English Literature from Kerala University and two post-graduate diplomas from the University of London, in Special Education and Broadcast Journalism. As a teenager she fell in love, but unfortunately had to undergo an arranged marriage with a fellow-Keralite. The anguish and pain she suffered as a result of an incompatible marriage was amplified after the birth of their

intellectually challenged child. The indifference of her husband made her all the more determined to break free from the marriage. All these events led her to the world of Special Education, and in 1990 she left for England where she met her childhood sweetheart whom she later married. In Delhi, Jaishree Misra is actively involved in running a residential home for intellectually challenged adults.

Author Jaishree Misra's "within/without" position with respect to Kerala society offers the readers a unique perspective on gender relations in Kerala society, which is considered one of the more progressive societies in contemporary India.

How was the reception of your first novel Ancient Promises in Kerala? How did the native Malayalis react to your fictional representation of their society?

I had been dreading the reception *Ancient Promise* was likely to get in Kerala, seeing that it doesn't exactly depict its people or societal norms positively. To my surprise, however, early reviews were enthusiastic and then, being what is called "a slow-burn seller" in the publishing industry, the book started to sell in vast numbers too. From the emails I receive, I find that most readers are struck by the similarity of their own experiences with that of the protagonist. So it's a simple case of the universality of experience making a book work. The literary establishment is another matter, however, and I ended up rather impressed by how self-critical they were willing to be in appreciating a not-so-positive view of Kerala from a diasporic Malayali. That takes a certain amount of confidence, in my opinion.

In most of the marital relationships portrayed in your fiction, the agonies and anxieties which many of the protagonists undergo are seemingly made so "ordinary" that they hardly realise how these impressions of violence subtly heap up as layers of residue in their psyche. And as an add-on, employing the method of comparative strategy, most mothers (like Janu's mother in Ancient Promises) seems to make this suffering so very trivial as compared to the colossal pain the next-door neighbour suffers. Have you ever realised the impact your fiction creates in reawakening readers to these little but significant realities of their lives.

The honest answer is that my first few books were written without any attempt to make political points. I still don't believe that it's the job of fiction to try and expose the novelist's own beliefs or carry any sort of social agenda but, as a writer's profile grows, it becomes quite difficult to ignore the expectation (or temptation) to imagine that one can change the world or at least shift people's attitudes in some way via the writing. Besides, my own feminism has grown alongside my novels so, yes, I have been tempted to use my characters to help

women see that they don't necessarily need to take the oppression that has become so much a part of the norm.

Matriliny was instrumental in granting agency or lending a voice to Malayali women. A Malayali woman's position was considered (in fact is still considered) far more privileged compared with that of the rest of her counterparts in the country. Does this erstwhile matrilineal system still have an impact in the present century? Please elaborate on this in the light of your novels.

Matriliny was a fabulous system within which Nair women could lead safer and more empowered lives than any other social system allowed in those times, simply by remaining in their own homes and environs after marriage rather than having to cut the umbilical cord and be transported to far off alien and not always hospitable households as women elsewhere did. Of course, matriliny wasn't all that it was touted to be as the head of the household continued to be a man (the *ammavan*, maternal uncle) and not all of these men had the welfare of their womenfolk as chief priority. Nevertheless, it was the most emancipated and emancipating inheritance system that was around at the time. While we still have remnants of this among the Nairs, by and large it has been watered down and taken on many patriarchal overtones from other social systems, to our detriment. The old system has left some positive attitudes behind but there has probably been a negative fall-out as well, mostly in leaving men feeling somewhat emasculated. Whenever I see evidence of certain lack of confidence or exaggerated male posturing, or indeed when I read about the problems of alcohol consumption in Kerala, I can't help wondering if the erstwhile matrilineal system has had something to do with it. The character of Suresh in *Ancient Promises* is an example of this, I suppose.

In many of your novels we get glimpses of the exotic landscape of Kerala. What inspires you the most about the place and what puts you off?

There's so much that is so wonderful about Kerala but I still feel a bit like Janu of *Ancient Promises* when she says, "Kerala is a place for holidays, not forever." It's a complex state, and still highly conservative. I find it sad that, despite the impressive education figures and the numbers of women who work and earn their living, it encourages an environment (especially in the upper classes) in which women have to "know their place" and behave in a certain way. It's subtle but it's there. "Literacy without liberation," I say in *Ancient Promises*.

What is your conception of the "Kerala Model" woman which is applauded by media and the state machinery alike? Are these claims realistic or mere representational strategies? Is an

average Kerala woman really better educated, healthier, less fertile and better empowered? Please comment.

In many ways, that's true. It's easy to make the Kerala woman look like a very fortunate creature when compared with women from other Indian states where they mostly struggle with very poor status economically and socially. However, it would be very wrong to claim that women in Kerala have an ideal life, even with the history of the matrilineal system. But that would be true of women everywhere in the world, even in the West. There are still many struggles to overcome, many attitudes to change, many glass ceilings to break. In Kerala, the biggest obstacles are attitudinal whereby women continue to labour against very subtle forms of oppression in the form of societal (read "male") expectations.

Caste, along with gender issues, becomes one of the focus areas of women writers from Kerala like Arundhati Roy, Anita Nair, Susan Vishwanathan. Why do you seem to opt out of this caste politics?

I don't think I've opted out of it as it's a subject that interests me greatly. I haven't covered all the topics that I feel angry about or curious about in my books yet. Give me time!

In Ancient Promises you have depicted how life becomes quite complex and stifling for the city bred Janu whose marriage is arranged against her wishes to a boy from Kerala. There's a lot of cultural disparity which surfaces for a diasporic Malayali. Being a diasporic Malayali yourself, do you feel this alienation surfacing while being in Kerala? Like a welcome drink served, do their questions too "hover around 'eppamaanu vane, eppam pogum'" (when did you arrive and when would you leave)? How do you deal with these disparities?

The indigenous Malayali is both proud and suspicious of the diaspora Malayali. They like the stories of Malayalis who have gone off and done well for themselves elsewhere but they also seem to get a bit uneasy when members of the diaspora return to the homeland with ideas that are unusual or bold and innovative. Rightly or wrongly, Malayalis would rather have Kerala stay exactly the way it is! And "maru naadan" (diasporic) Malayalis learn very quickly to either keep their "foreign" opinions to themselves or take them back to wherever they came from.

Paradoxically in Accidents like Love and Marriage, Gayatri Menon has to deal with a similar cultural dichotomy in Delhi. Do you think the representation of Malayalis and Punjabis was a little stereotypical in nature? Does the matrilineal past of a Malayali woman become an impediment in the acculturation process?

It was meant to be that, actually, as I had set out to write a comedy of manners, a genre that thrives on stereotypes and stock situations. No, of course, it isn't impossible for a modern-day Malayali woman to fit into any environment, even a boisterous Punjabi one. Generally speaking, we are a slightly diffident people but even we are slowly losing our inhibitions. About time too!

Given the fact that social media is making a huge impact on people, do you feel creative writing is ushering in that social change that we all are aspiring for now?

As a writer, I find that my novels seem to create better opportunities for “change” than my occasional column pieces in newspapers. Which is strange, given that journalism is usually the vehicle one thinks of as being more likely to effect social change. It's probably down to the fact that people generally don't like being told what to do and what to think. In novels, one can achieve this very subtly via character and situation. Academia's problem is that it's a small and exclusive group of people talking mostly to each other. There's an element then of “preaching to the converted,” rather than reaching out to those people who most need exposure to bold new ideas. It's a comforting thought that novels continue to play a powerful role.

Literary critics have always harped on the fact that distance provides a fresh perspective and lends objectivity to the writings. Do you feel as a writer you are enjoying a better understanding of the social realities because you keep shuttling between Delhi, Kerala and London?

It was Salman Rushdie who talked about “stepping out of the frame in order to see the picture better” and I can't agree more. I'm an outsider of sorts everywhere that I go, never quite belonging completely anywhere. Luckily, for a writer, this is hugely advantageous. Inevitably, I find that I write with more clarity about India when I'm in England and the reverse.