

Feminine Sensibility in Jaishree Misra's Accidents like Love and Marriage

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Abstract

“Accidents like Love and Marriage,” penned by Jaishree Misra, holds a prominent position in the canon of modern literature. The novel makes an attempt to convey the essence of human feelings and relationships while it is set against the backdrop of the dynamic cultural transformations and socioeconomic changes of our times. Within its pages, the author expertly weaves a narrative that goes beyond mere storytelling and delves deep into the psyche of its characters, uncovering layers of emotions and vulnerabilities that match the complexities of real life. As one turns the pages of “Accidents like Love and Marriage,” it becomes clear that the book is more than merely a vehicle for providing pleasure, rather, it is a canvas onto which the myriad shades of human emotions are painted with a deft hand. This paper tries to focus on this facet of the novel.

Keywords: Human feelings, cultural transformation, socioeconomic changes, vulnerabilities, complexities of real life

Introduction

Literature is a rich tapestry woven with diverse themes that reflect the complexities of human experience. Among these, the exploration of feminine sensibility remains a profound and enduring subject. This paper undertakes a critical study of Jaishree Misra's ‘Accidents like Love and Marriage’ to examine how feminine sensibility is articulated through characterization, narrative structure, and thematic development. The novel offers nuanced portrayal of women's emotional worlds and their negotiations with love, marriage, family, and selfhood within contemporary society.

Literary critics and theorists have contributed significantly to the understanding of feminine sensibility. Psychoanalytic approaches, such as Freudian and Jungian analyses, explore unconscious desires and emotional conflicts that influence characters' actions. Feminist literary theory, on the other hand, critically examines how patriarchal power structures shape women's representation in literature. Closely related is the concept of the female gaze, which challenges male-dominated perspectives by centering women's experiences, aspirations, and agency. Together, these frameworks provide essential tools for analyzing feminine sensibility in modern narratives.

In contemporary literature, the portrayal of feminine sensibility has evolved to incorporate intersectional concerns involving class, culture, ethnicity, and changing gender roles. Rapid social change and globalization have encouraged writers to adopt innovative narrative strategies that capture women's emotional struggles and achievements. Female

characters are no longer confined to traditional roles but are depicted as individuals negotiating complex identities and choices.

‘Accidents like Love and Marriage’ presents an interwoven narrative of urban lives shaped by chance encounters, emotional entanglements, and familial expectations. Through a diverse cast of characters, Misra explores the unpredictability of relationships and the emotional consequences of love and marriage. The novel serves as a rich canvas for examining feminine sensibility, allowing readers insight into the vulnerabilities, resilience, and transformations of its female protagonists. Sherine Allena Joseph and Ann Thomas are of the view that

“Through the various characters in the novel, Misra not only unfolds the plight of the tangled relationships but also exhibits the alienated self of her female characters. The emotional alienation in a man-woman relationship leads to marital discords similar to Jagdish-Swarn and Neena-Rohit. Courageous Gayathri, resembling the New Woman, speaks to the readers that despite the accidents that occur in a woman’s life, a woman should adore self-esteem and be courageous enough to decide and live her life independently as well as assertively. Misra’s women protagonists are strong and self-assertive. They possess the attributes of a New Woman. They realise the catastrophic impact of subduing their female ‘self’ by the patriarchal society. They break the chains of repression that quash their determination to shatter the oppressive forces around them. The female characters resist the psychic despotism of their male counterparts through self-determinism and assertiveness. They traverse their ‘alienated self’ to the empowered self. They realise their feminine consciousness, which installs in them the strength to abandon their husbands or lovers and relieve themselves from the androcentric clench that subdues their ‘self’. They thus evolve as the ‘New-Woman’ embracing their autonomy” (Sherine and Ann: 2019)

Misra’s narrative style, marked by evocative language and multiple perspectives, enables readers to access the emotional landscapes of her characters. By employing interior monologue and shifting viewpoints, she deepens the exploration of feminine sensibility and highlights the private struggles of women.

Recurring themes such as love, self-discovery, societal expectations, fate, and the passage of time form the structural framework of the novel. Motifs of chance encounters and emotional uncertainty reflect the unpredictability of life and the diverse expressions of women’s sensibility. Hardeep Kaur and S. P. Jindal say that it is actually impossible to avoid accidents like these:

“Jaishree Misra’s novel is all about accidents which occur in our day-to-day life. Accidents like falling in love or getting married or trying to fix incompatible relationships. People who are involved in these accidents keep blaming themselves for such occurrences, it is actually impossible to avoid accidents. The novel follows the three Delhi based families, The Sachdevs and The Singhs are rich, upper class Punjabies, while the Menons are of middle class “unfashionable” variety. The lives of all the characters are interconnected by love and marriage. There is a good deal of

drama everywhere. The author who is born in Delhi in an Army family weaves her story around the three urban families of the Singhs, Menons and the Sachdevs to build up her argument. Marriages are business transactions for them.” (Kaur and Jindal: 2018)

The narrative follows multiple female protagonists as they navigate life, love, and identity. Their emotional conflicts are shaped by personal histories, cultural expectations, and relational pressures, offering a rich exploration of women’s psychological and emotional terrains.

Set within a society governed by gender norms and stereotypes, the novel illustrates how cultural expectations shape women’s choices and perceptions of fulfilment. The tension between societal demands and personal aspirations underscores the resilience required to resist conformity.

Identity and self-discovery emerge as central concerns for the novel’s female characters. While societal pressures restrict their autonomy, journeys of self-realization enable them to reclaim agency and redefine their identities beyond imposed roles.

The novel also highlights how feminine sensibility contributes to broader social change. Through acts of resistance and self-assertion, women challenge patriarchal norms, influencing the communities they inhabit and fostering conversations on empowerment and autonomy. An intersectional lens further enriches the depiction of feminine sensibility by examining how gender intersects with class, culture, and ethnicity. The varied social backgrounds of the characters demonstrate that feminine sensibility is not monolithic but shaped by multiple, overlapping factors.

Misra portrays the institution of marriage as fraught with emotional conflict and social expectation. Women are expected to conform, while men often exercise authority both within and outside the household. Gayatri’s resistance to marriage highlights the clash between tradition and modernity, reflecting shifting attitudes toward gender roles.

The story revolves around the three urban families of the Singhs, Menons, and Sachdevs to build up her argument. Marriages are business transactions for them. Mothers-in-law still expect their daughters-in-law to be obedient, to spend time with their in-laws, to serve them, and to seek permission for every activity. Swarn wants a daughter-in-law who will obey her every command and be at her feet. She expects her to perform all those duties that were once performed by her. She couldn’t obtain that from her first son’s marriage to Rohit, as she got a daughter-in-law, Neena, who doesn’t listen to her.

“You could never predict how these modern-day daughters-in-law would react to the most innocent of queries. And who was this friend from abroad? Surely, she was entitled to know more about her daughter-in-law’s movements! That’s how it used to be anyway. Daughters-in-law did not just announce their departures and up and leave like that; moreover, they were wearing such strange, tight clothes” (ALLM: p. 35)

In her second son's, Tarun's, case, he loved a Mallu girl. Swarn showed extreme hatred for the Mallus, and Mishra depicts the racism against Mallus through Swarn.

“Madrasi, I have no time for Madrasis. Funny black people who say aiyyo-aiyyo and make a mess eating sambar idlis” (ALLM: p. 84)

The novelist has shown the *Pativarata* image of a wife in the case of Neena, who loves her husband so much. She is so in love with Rohit that she can't think he could betray her. Mishra emphasises in this novel that arranged marriages are based on considerations rather than personal ones. Mishra deals with the psyche of modern women, who wish to talk about the upheavals that are caused by the meeting of the traditional concept of wife and the changing gender roles that modernity is causing in their lives. Neena is covered in confusion.

“What! You didn't think so., ‘What! You didn't think? Oh, Shonali, you idiot; I'm a respectably married woman, you know!’ ‘Married! What the hell, yaar, as if that's ever stopped, anybody!’ Shonali retorts scornfully. ‘Which era have you been living in, honey? Every married person I know is having an affair.’

Neena is instantly interested. ‘Really? Who, who?’ ‘Well, that would be telling, Shonali drawls mysteriously. ‘First, you tell me who you're planning to go slow dancing with, you crafty little thing. Not your husband, surely.’ The determinedly single Shonali utters the word husband as though it burns her tongue to say it.

“Of course, I am!” Neena defends her virtue hotly. “I love my husband, you idiot, however crazy that may seem to you.”

“Nobody loves her husband, yaar. Well, at least not after the first three days. After that, it's called putting up with.’ Neena finds it difficult to argue with Shonali's air of authority on the subject. ‘Oh, shut up, yaar,’ she says. ‘Leave me to deal with my marriage, and I'll next speak to you on the subject only after you've gone and fallen in love.’ ‘Never!’ declares Shonali.” (ALLM: p. 69)

Feminism was a major aspect of this story, shown through Gayatri and Neena's mother, Kammy. Though Gayatri and Neena were best friends, they had very different virtues. Gayatri was a feminist who would stand up for herself and think women should be independent, which she inherited from her mother, and Neena wanted nothing but marriage and kids, having no interest in a career or personal development. In the end, when she got to know that Rohit cheated on her, she realised what her mother and her friend Shonali had been talking about. Kammy was an active feminist, but her husband never supported her. This never stopped her from leading her social movements, though.

Mishra's treatment of the man-woman relationship is rooted in her ability to understand and describe the male point of view. She also showed the troubles a man faces in marriage, not only being biased toward women. Neena never understood how hard Rohit works and tries to be a dutiful son, father, and husband. She also complains to her mother about Rohit often.

“You talk as if you’re the one who’s chasing after the kids all day. You just sit in the air-conditioned comfort of your office.’ Rohit contemplates telling her that running a large textile factory involves marginally more than sitting in his cabin, but he decides that she is not likely to accept this piece of information with particular astonishment and wonder. Neena carries on talking, closing finally and unsympathetically, If I can find the energy to go dancing after a whole day with the kids, then so can you. So stop moaning” (ALLM: p. 69)

On the other hand, Jagdish was never loved or understood by his wife, Swarn. The readers would be satisfied with the ending, where Jagdish yells at his wife and finally reveals his pent-up frustration from all the suffering.

“It is not what I have done to him, you stupid, stupid woman,’ Jagdish cries, now openly weeping himself. ‘It is what he has done. No, but you you. Jagdish waggles his hands, losing his flow for a few seconds before starting up again: “You cannot see how either of your sons is capable of being bad. In your mind, it is only I who am like that. I have never claimed to be perfect, Ji, but there are things, Swarn, that I have never done. Never. In all my years with you, you stupid, ungrateful woman, Have I ever received any thanks for that? But your sons! First, Tarunbeta tells you what he thinks of you. That was only the start, Swarn. Now just go upstairs and take a look at what your Pyaara Dulaara Beta Rohit has done.” (ALLM: p. 124)

Although the story was perfectly paced, the storyline was a little thin, and the characters weren’t described perfectly. There are many characters, the main ones being Swarn, Jagdish, Rohit, Tarun, Gayatri, and Neena. Some of the characters were a bit controversial. For example, in Swarn’s case, Mishra showed that Swarn could’ve been a feminist, but Swarn always wanted her daughters-in-law to serve her and be obedient to their husbands, which is definitely the opposite of feminism.

“silly jobs that some women, she thought scornfully, made careers out of. Swarn could, technically, have been a very good feminist had she lived in another place and time.” (ALLM: p. 8)

“These days men were such idiots, allowing their wives to wear stupid clothes and go off wherever they wanted with no questions asked.” (ALLM: p. 35)

Tarun was shown as nice and considerate but kept on forcing Gayatri to marry her, up to the point he showed up at her house and talked her father into marriage without her permission. Rohit fell in love with Tracy the moment he saw her and felt sad when he left her. When he left for Delhi, he immediately left all his feelings behind. This also shows the readers how love is temporary, and nothing lasts long, not even a soul-bonded marriage.

Incompatible relationships are a peculiar thing Mishra targets in this novel. Even though their relationship was incompatible, there were some who chose to leave it, such as Kammy and Manny, and some who chose to do something about it, like Jagdish, who leaves the house in the end. Gayatri and Tarun were also incompatible, but somehow they fell in love.

The difference between the rich and the poor was also shown very intricately. The Menons were a middle-class family, while the Sachdevs were high-class. The Menons got ready with their best outfits when visiting the Sachdev household, but they were shunned not only because of their Mallu roots but also because of their poor and humble dressing style. In some parts of the story, the Menons household was shown as a typical middle-class family, and Keshava wanted to marry off his daughter to Tarun, a rich guy.

“For Neena, visits to Gayatri’s house were an eye-opener because the Menon family were her only insight into ordinary middle-class life. Through them, she had learned, inadvertently, that the price of rice had gone up again or that bedrooms were not always air-conditioned spaces.” (ALLM: p. 35)

Gayatri, on the other hand, had never allowed herself to be overawed by the plush Singh residence at Sainik Farms, with its five cars (among four people), dogs so lazy that they seem not to have bothered to even master the art of barking, and, of course, a battery of servants. (ALLM: p. 35)

The poor envying the rich was shown through the cook, Moolchand, as well as in his conversations with the driver, Nek Singh.

“We are only poor people, working hard to fill our stomachs; we just keep ourselves busy doing that. Not like these moneyed people, nothing better to do, just shouting at each other... what a kalyug it is we live in, Nek Singh... believe me, if I had money and lived in a big house like this one” (ALLM: p. 115)

Moolchand was a peculiar character who the readers would come to hate at the introduction itself, yet a great addition to the story. Moolchand was a lewd, perverse opportunist who wanted to catch the attention of his memsahib. The workers’ mindset in a rich household was subtly mentioned by Mishra.

Mishra also mentioned the old-generation issue of the dowry when a woman is to be married off to another family. The Menons, being fairly middle-class, worry about how to get their dowry to offer to the Sachdevs.

“I know, but you know these Delhi types. However wealthy, they must get their dowry and cars and all that.’ Keshava slumps down in his chair, looking mildly worried. He knows Raji has a point, but he soon sits up Provident again, saying briskly, ‘Well, we haven’t touched Fund, and we’ve got our State Bank savings. And half your mother’s jewellery. We’ll be able to do quite well with our Gayatri. You just stop worrying and get back to your writing.’” (ALLM: p. 80)

The best part of it was the humour. Serious situations have been dealt with a clever wit that lets the reader soak in the intensity of the scene but also laughs while doing so. Although it started out funny and interesting, it progressed way too fast as Tarun and Gayatri’s relationship advanced abnormally quickly from love to proposal. There was no time for Gayatri to develop feelings, as Tarun kept persisting. The ending also seems unfinished and rushed, as no real resolution is reached. Everyone is heartbroken at the end,

and no damaged relationship is fixed, leaving the readers with an incomplete story. In an interview, an author was asked the question related stereotyping the Malayalee,

“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?”

Misra replies saying

“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!”

Through interior monologues, dialogue, and interpersonal relationships, Misra offers deep insight into feminine sensibility. Relationships act as mirrors reflecting women’s desires, fears, and resistance to societal expectations. Venkata Lakshmi is of the view that

“The author’s main focus is on the struggles of women. She projects herself as the representative and perfect spokesperson of the women folk of the present time. Women in her novels seem to be a personification of modern women who can face the burden of inhibition they have carried from generation to generation. Misra speaks about the various instances that lead to ruptures in relationships. She pictures the complexity of relationships, when the elements of love and loyalty are missing. She believes in the quest for the self, which merges in the psyche of the Indian women. She takes efforts to make her readers understand the full spectrum of emotions, from the heights of total delight to the depths of grief, like the various stages in life. She brings about the predicaments and problems, faced by women in the intricate web of relationships.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, ‘Accidents like Love and Marriage’ offers a compelling exploration of feminine sensibility through its portrayal of emotionally complex female characters navigating love, marriage, and identity. Misra’s narrative illuminates the intricate emotional landscapes that shape women’s lives, underscoring the role of feminine sensibility as a dynamic force of resistance, self-realization, and social transformation. The novel contributes meaningfully to contemporary literary discourse on gender, identity, and empowerment.

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