

PANKAJ MISHRA

THE
ROMANTICS

A NOVEL

"Impressive....A resonant and highly subtle novel."
—Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*



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The Romantics Pankaj Mishra

Pankaj Mishra is one of the most promising talents of his generation, and this stunning, universally praised novel of self-discovery heralds a remarkable career.

The young Brahman Samar has come to the holy city of Benares to complete his education and take the civil service exam that will determine his future. But in this city redolent of timeworn customs, where pilgrims bathe in the sacred Ganges and breathe in smoke from burning ghats along the shore, Samar is offered entirely different perspectives on his country. Miss West and her circle, indifferent to the reality around them, represent those drawn to India as a respite from the material world. And Rajesh, a sometimes violent, sometimes mystical leader of student malcontents, presents a more jaundiced view. More than merely illustrating the clash of cultures, Mishra presents the universal truth that our desire for the other is our most painful joy.

The Romantics Details

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Author : Pankaj Mishra

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From Reader Review The Romantics for online ebook

Thea Jessen says

Giving this three stars because of an amazing beginning. The 100 first pages were so good, I was definitely thinking this would be a 5 star rating. The culture clash between Europeans and Indians was so interesting to delve into, especially from an Indian point of view. However, after 100 pages the plot just kinda stopped. I mean...

Character development? Nah, not really. Besides, I didn't feel like the protagonist was fleshed out enough to make me understand some of his actions.

Love interest? Lol, wouldn't say so.

Plot development? NON EXISTENT

So yeah. This was a disappointment.

Fabian says

The novel is a coming-of-age tale that's practically Victorian. Our protagonist, but a mere spectator of a modern and exciting merger between East and West. Living in India, Samar is an intellectual who loves to read. He has this gift to take on Western classics like Flaubert's "Sentimental Education" & applies them to his daily life as a university student who, although wanting to experience his world as any youth would, is a teeny bit hesitant, i.e. hopelessly flawed. Miss West, his elder friend embodies this radical figure, the Romantic, like everyone else who surrounds Samar. I adore the moral of the novel, which is that "People are people...no matter what." The book also reads like a sprawling (yet comprehensible) travel guide through India... tinged, of course, in will-never-get-old romantic conventions.

Ruth says

Well at least I finished it this time...

Boredom got to me last time I tried to read this book. The narrator is a dull, insecure observer who doesn't reveal enough of himself or others for this reader to be drawn into his world.

Samar reminisces about his time as a student in the holy city of Benares, where he hoped to lose himself in books. My response to this book is much like his response to his first reading of Flaubert's "Sentimental Education" which struck him as "flat and overly long. [He] did persevere to the very end, but it was with the bloody-mindedness with which a man might finish a marathon long after he has run out of energy."

I find the parallels between these two books more interesting than the novel itself, and my summary of "The Romantics" is best summed up by Samar's own summary of Flaubert's writing: "long detailed descriptions that go nowhere, of artistic and literary ambitions that dwindle and then fade altogether, of lives that have to reconcile themselves to a slow, steady shrinking of horizons... something of Hindu fatalism... a sense of life as a drift and futility..."

artistic and literary ambitions? tick

long detailed descriptions that go nowhere? tick
a sense of life as a drift? tick
[Yawn]

Magdelanye says

Because I loved his vivid and personable history of the Buddha, I was keen to read this fictionalized account of the authors formative years. Maybe that was too much to impose on this rather aimless coming of age story that reveals PM in a less noble light.

The dated and mostly irrelevant knowledge I possessed only confused me further; it made me look for meaning and nuance where none existed. p86

The protagonist ...seemed to mirror my own self-image with his large, passionate, but impulsive longings, his indecisiveness, his aimlessness, his self-contempt...p145

Perhaps when I have resolved these things for myself I will be able to come to a greater appreciation of this book which I give a 5/7 in my system , or in GR system 3.5

Claire McAlpine says

Reached for this off the bookshelf while suffering a fever and cold and was just what I needed, remembering those rooftop guest houses and the tangled kites, the ghats, the river boats, the pilgrims of Varanasi (Benares). A wonderful look across and within cultures from the perspective of a young Indian man.

Hrishikesh says

Pankajbhai disappoints. I abandoned this book half-way when I realized that all that I was doing was wasting my time and being rendered melancholic.

I expected the book to be a colorful account of Pankaj Mishra's days in Dehradun. It does not deliver. The characters, the "Romantics" are a bunch of shallow, pretentious individuals for whom abstraction is a convenient excuse to escape from the world; they are unable to reveal in its beauty. Pankaj Mishra is fascinated with Europeans in Benares; while this is not a crime, lacking depth most certainly is.

All-in-all, a dreary account. The problem here is that we have only the author's account to perceive his world. This is not to say that the author's account is accepted blindly; there is, of course, a spirit of inquiry, a sense of cynicism, of wonderment, of comparison with one's own empirical and value-based framework. But then, that, in a nutshell, is nothing more than Us and author. Nowhere do the other characters speak of their free will. Perhaps this may have made a difference.

In the spirit of objectivity, I do submit that in a different time and space, I may have been more charitable towards the book. But today, the 7th of February, 2014, I find it to be BAD.

erica says

The "romantics" referenced in this novel's title are the expatriate Europeans living in Benares, India, but also the young Indian men who have fallen in with this group.

Our narrator, Samar, is a Brahman (thanks to Google, I learned that this term refers to *a member of the highest Hindu caste, that of the priesthood*) student who has moved to the holy city of Benares to study for the Civil Service Exam. He spends his days reading nineteenth century European novels in the library (such as *The World as Will and Idea*: Abridged in 1 Vol, *The Torrents of Spring*, *First Love*, and *Mumu*, and *Sentimental Education*). Before reading this book, I had only a vague understanding of the caste system in India and the lingering effects of colonialism, and I was moved by Samar's fascination with these books and how he and his friend Rajesh were able to identify so deeply with Flaubert.

Every young Indian wants to pass the Civil Service Exam and gain a coveted government job, but the pool of hopeful applicants is far larger than the job market. Many students languish for years, studying for and fruitlessly taking the exam, before giving up, dejected, and moving on. In this post-colonial setting, members of Samar's caste have no outlet other than the Civil Service Exam and a government job. Samar's father is a member of an older generation whose way of life is a thing of the distant past. There is a disconnect between the Brahman's traditional societal role and what is left in this new India.

Samar, through his British neighbor, Miss West, meets a group of young European expatriates. The two members of this group he is most taken with are Miss West herself and her French friend Catherine. I kept getting these two women confused; their personalities are largely interchangeable. Regardless, they have a profound effect on Samar. Their "freedom," their aimlessness, their "romance" is alien to him. In one memorable scene, Catherine asks Samar if he had ever been in love before. He did not know how to answer her; in Samar's mind, marriage came first and love came afterwards; love before or without marriage was pointless.

The plot of this book is not action driven. Mishra is writing about caste and class in post-colonial India. I was deeply moved by this novel although it took me a while to get into the book.

Vikas Singh says

This is Pankaj Mishra's first book. Since the book is set in Varanasi, I had to read it. But frankly i was quite disappointed to read it. A depressing book, it follows the pseudo acceptance of the West's fascination and way of looking at Varanasi. There is no coherence of central plot or idea and when you finish the book, you think, why did I waste my time on it? Avoid.

Lisa says

The *Romantics*, by contemporary Indian author Pankaj Mishra, seems to be his only novel. Which is a pity, because I really enjoyed it.

Last weekend I went to a Melbourne Writers' Festival session called Bookwallah, which I thought was going to be a promotion of Indian writing, but instead the session turned out to be primarily journalistic commentary about the state of India today. The panel consisted of Annie Zaidi, Chandras Choudhury and moderator Nick Law. Although they didn't really talk much about books they did offer a glimpse of the sort of themes one might encounter in the literature of India:

- Religious conflict: every Indian, they said, had to make up his/her mind about the conflict between Hindu and Muslim, even though there are now some who say that the hatreds of Partition are now long ago.
- City versus village life: the vast majority of Indians still live in villages, although of course this is changing.
- Indian democracy: this is not taken for granted, [as it is, for instance, in Australia]. There are different layers, headed obviously by parliamentary democracy, but [rather like Australia] each state is responsible for some aspects such as education but can be over-ruled by the Federal Parliament if they over-step their responsibilities. Then there is also village democracy [similar to our local councils] where apparently it takes some courage to stand up against the rich and powerful.
- Corruption: is endemic, and at all levels of bureaucracy, from registering a crime to doing the paperwork to buy a house.
- The desire to enter the life-changing formal labour market i.e. to have ongoing employment with a significant employer rather than casual work in the informal labour market where most Indians work at whatever they can.
- Class and caste, a pervasive preoccupation going back centuries. It's not talked about much, but it doesn't need to be because it is taken for granted that marriages will sustain the status quo.
- The size of the population. There are 1.2 billion people in India, so for example, if 5% of them work in the burgeoning call centre industry, (educated enough to know English, do a little maths and have competency with IT) then the impact on the domestic economy is huge because this 5% now has an income to spend. While the panel did not refer to the fact that India has just had to pass Food Security legislation to alleviate poverty, 20% of the population is middle class - and that's about 250 million people.
- Diversity: India is multi-ethnic and multi-lingual, and Indian authors write in many different languages. Even if one knows, say, four of these languages, it's not possible, they said, to grasp the entirety of Indian writing.

While I had already recognised most of these themes in *The Romantics* by the time I heard this session, it was interesting to find them in a wider context. *The Romantics* is an ironic coming-of-age story in which the central character Samar finds that his disillusionment with life and with India is much like that of Frédéric Moreau in *A Sentimental Education*. Having read Flaubert's novel but failed to grasp its resonance with his own life, Samar finds on a second reading, that:

The protagonist, Frédéric Moreau, seemed to mirror my own self-image with his large, passionate but imprecise longings, his indecisiveness, his self-contempt. Also the book - through its long, detailed descriptions, spread over many years, of love affairs that go nowhere, of artistic and literary ambitions that dwindle and then fade altogether, of lives that have to reconcile themselves to a slow, steady shrinking of horizons - held out a philosophical vision that I couldn't fail to recognise. Something of a Hindu fatalism seemed to come off its pages, a sense of life as drift and futility and illusion. (p. 210)

For Samar, the disillusionment comes because he romanticises the West. Mishra's novel shows how for this generation the gulf between ambition and reality can make for a painful journey to adulthood. In this poignant coming of age story Samar is smitten by his new Western friends but conscious that he will never have the same prospects. Always an outsider at events, he gradually realises that he will never be able to travel the world as they do or be as careless about money, nor can he be as insouciant about relationships because he is hidebound by Brahmin traditions, as well as by Indian class and caste consciousness.

Samar comes to the city of Benares to study for the Civil Service exams. He's not well-off: he's a Brahmin whose father retains some nostalgia for its traditions and expects Samar to shoulder traditional responsibilities, but the Brahmin caste does not, in the new India, have the wealth and power that it formerly had. So Samar needs to join the formal labour market and he has to pass those exams to achieve employment in the Civil Service. It's highly competitive and there are thousands of rivals, most of whom will be disappointed.

To read the rest of my review please visit <http://anzlitlovers.com/2013/09/05/th...>

Nivedita says

The *Romantics*, Mishra's only novel, is well-stated, with a lovely use of language and semantics. But if I, an unestablished not-yet-emerging author, had written this novel for a creative writing class, I'm sure it would have come back to me slashed and bleeding red ink all over the place. Mishra tells a first person narrative of Samar, a young academic living in Benares, and the various foreigners - presumably the titular romantics - he encounters, becomes acquainted with, and may or may not befriend. He aimlessly meanders, as does the novel, through about a decade of his life, without really accomplishing much.

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Inderjit Sanghera says

The Romantics' is, in many ways, about the unbridgeable gap between two disparate cultures; between the supercilious sense of superiority which the West holds over the East, a feeling which is perpetuated by those who claim to hold an affinity to the East, seeking to reduce it's rich and diverse cultural heritage into an easy set of cliches and platitudes, fetishizing its beliefs, people and practices, cloaking the vapidly of their spiritual seances beneath a garbled set of misconstructions and misconstruements. Likewise, the East, struggling under the weight of a sense of collective cultural inferiority reveres the West to the point of adulation. This isn't so much a criticism of cultural interaction, after all every culture is fluid and is a patchwork quilt of a myriad of different beliefs and cultures, but more a reflection of the toxicity of imperialism, of the deep-rooted psychological impact it continues to have and, in the context of '*The Romantics'*, the barriers it creates between individuals from these cultures from forming relationships, both romantic and platonic, with one another.

'The Romantics' follows the story of the reclusive and introverted Samar and his time in Benares. The city itself is rendered beautifully, its vibrancy brought alive beneath a cacophony of colours, of pink-tinted sunsets and the dazzling reflections of the summer sun on the waters of the River Ganges. Samar runs into Diana West, a pessimistic if well-meaning English woman whose friendship allows Samar to break free from the shell of loneliness within which he encased himself. Samar makes multiple references to Flaubert's '*A Sentimental Education*' in the novel and the reader can see the link between Samar and Frederic; both are naive and callow, repressed by a deep sense of diffidence and inferiority, withdrawn from life and in thrall to an older, beautiful and outwardly confident woman who is unattainable. Both use this experience to grow and mature, although a streak of cynicism and bourgeoisie mediocrity embeds itself in Frederic by the end of '*A Sentimental Education*', Samar is still hanging on the precipice between his insularity and desire to become an active member of society at the end of the novel. In Samar's case the woman who he falls in love

with is Catherine, a French woman, whose outward assurance belies a deep sense of inferiority and need to be loved, her personality is perfectly captured and encapsulated in the following passage where Samar describes the party in which he first met Catherine;

“But it is the picture of her sitting up very straight on the jute mat, abstractedly plucking at the tanpura’s strings, the light from the short, flickering flame of the diyas bathing her clear, unblemished face in a golden glow, that has stayed most vividly with me, and is the central force that illuminates the rest of the evening in my memory.”

Yet it would be hard to describe Samar’s relationship or feelings for Catherine as being passionate; rather they are a tepid series of emotions which are ensconced in a deep sense of inferiority and idealisation of Catherine and love—even when the two achieve physical intimacy their attempts are clumsy and languid, both are held back by the idealised images they have created of one another in their minds; Catherine as an unobtainable, sexually confident and emotionally mature European woman and Samar as a naive, gullible and repressed Indian man. Of course both characters have personalities which, more or less, adhere to these ideals, but neither character is able to view the other from outside this narrow lens. To further complicate matters, Catherine is in a relationship with the mediocre and mewling musician Anand, who she idealises and imbues with non-existent qualities; in her mind he represents the exoticism of Indian, misreading his selfishness for being misunderstood.

However, it is Mishra’s colouring of the secondary characters and Indian where the novel really shines. Mishra brings out the essential hopelessness poverty endemic in India. Nowhere is this more apparent than the case of Rajesh; an otherwise sensitive and intelligent young man who is pushed into a life of crime and isolation, Mishra emphasises the sense of helplessness Rajesh is over-come by as fate and circumstance push him towards a life which he never wished for. One of the most resonant passages is of when Samar visits Rajesh’s village and witnesses the poverty and degradation of its inhabitants. This is the “real” India which the Western characters so constantly seek, an India of subjugation and extreme hardship and not the simulacrum of spiritual stereotypes which they imbue it with. Mishra is, however able to wonderfully render the magical, even mystical beauty of the Indian landscape, of the uniqueness and quiddity of its atmosphere;

“The sea from my window was a broad sparkling band of silver foil-blinding after a long spell in my curtained room—which, later that afternoon, as dark clouds gathered, shaded into restless grey. The rain, when it came, briefly pockmarked the sea and the obliterated all sight in a steamy white mist. The long asphalt promenade was deserted now; but, on humid, rainless afternoons that followed, I would see a couple of toy sellers, their red and yellow balloons straining upwards against the silently heaving seas.”

“The Romantics” is a beautiful crafted about love and relationships between individuals from opposing and incompatible cultures.

Sairam Krishnan says

Had been meaning to read Pankaj Mishra for some time, especially with all the raving reviews of 'From the Ruins of Empire' I came upon recently. Found this in hardback at Blossoms, Bangalore at a bargain price and pounced immediately.

I have been rewarded suitably, for this is a very very good book. Well written and poignant, the story weaves in and out of places etched on to India's layered past - Allahabad, Varanasi, Pondicherry, Dharamshala,

Mussoorie and paints them in vivid, colorful portraits. The author has a way with describing places, this is a gift not everyone has possession of.

But that said, the novel is slow, very slow in some places and descriptions of places sometimes feel too drawn out. That is the author's choice, and anyway, they don't affect the narrative much, which follows its own sad, melancholy pace, like the evenings on the Banaras Ghats Samar describes in the book.

This book is a lot of things in one. A coming of age tome, a book about how the east and the west are so different and yet so much similar, a memoir and also a strange love story. Different people read the same book in different ways and for me, this book was about understanding. Samar lives through a lot of things and it takes him time to understand what he experienced, which is true for all of us.

This is where the author delivers. Pankaj Mishra describes feelings and emotions beautifully and the novel's strength lies in the detail of the flow of thought leading to understanding. The characters are haunting - the bantering Miss West with so much longing inside her, the insecure but beautiful Catherine, the enigmatic Rajesh, Shyam, who we last see in a cage. Each of them are memorable, and I loved the descriptions of the Banaras Hindu University too, with its tea shops, hostel rooms and library. I once had the privilege of visiting the old Osmania university in Hyderabad and the troubles and students there were what came to mind.

Read the book for the characters in it - beautiful, flawed dreamers all of them. The book's name could really never have been anything else.

Kamran says

A strain of novels, end where they commenced.

It is a story of Samar, an aspirant of civil service exams. It is his journey of bewilderment (psychological), affinity, love, knowledge, adventure and being judgemental or in case making ideal by outward 'happiness' to those who are much like 'The Fault in our stars.' (Miss West in the case). And why Civil Servant Exams are Integral for impoverished students and what occurs (for shadowy inkling) to them if they fail to pass the exams (Rajes's friend Partap).

The most centered city in the novel is Benares (A city which is holiest of Hinsus and in ensuing turned out for Samar as replete with the 'richness of life and the world revealed to Samar') but for seven years he 'willingly' resides in Dharamshala.

In Benares, he rents one of the Pandatji's rooms after acquiring admission in Hundu Uni. Pandatji was living there with his wife and a cook Shyam; An interesting character, monotonously drones ... in his slurred voice, 'Greed is the biggest evil, it destroys families, sunders son from parents, husband from wife...' which turns out to be true in the end. There, Samar, encounters Miss West; with whom Samar establishes an amicable relation which leads towards Catherine; A French adroit woman: Heroine of the novel with whom Samar first exchanges pieces of literary tastes and then in Kalpi, falls in love with her, is reisded with her Indian boyfriend Annand (who seems Antagonist in the beginning) And from rest of the characters, most predominated is Rajesh; A profound university fellow(which in the end turns out to be more notorious than ever for being a contract killer). The journey of Rajesh remains mysterious which represents University milieu.

Thoughtful fantasies are pangled with description vividly crafted with cinematic intensity. I would have named it merely descriptive if it were not rendered by a balanced approach with the title-story, which is a rare attribute of Mishra.

While prusing someone perpetually brows on pages with the emotional upheaval much like, "As I came back to the house, walking down the dark alley that led to it, I would be suffused by a strange sense of anticipation; the sense that there might be something, someone a letter, a person, a telegram waiting for me, who or which at one stroke would change my life for ever and, leaping across all the intermediate steps, transport me instantly into a world cleansed free of such exacting cares and anxieties."

Miss West in the novel is a sign of Journey, Suspicion, and Music lovers. Samar's parents in the novel sought Freedom. Catherine is a blend of cultures; Indian and French... A romantic character (A bit of Coelho's Adultery's heroin??)

There were many moments of joy in the novel. One of the perceptible intervals was the intimacy moment of Samar with Catherine and yes there were also moments of sudden shock and one of them was, yes, the breakup letter from Catherine to Samar. Another interesting part in the novel for me was the changing impressions of Reading interests of Samar. Entirely adored the part. Connecting Rajes's life with Frederic (Sentimental Education by Flaubert) is another astonishing aspect of the novel.

Another most endearing aspect of the novel is 'Genetic Connection' about which the father of Sammar repeats time and again;

"We all have something in us of our forebears; we must act true to their legacy." A nostalgic and fundamental connections with the past.

Mishra has a stern authority which keep resonating through every prose and page with beatific and flustering expressions of the reader. Concatenation of events are so flawlessly arranged that one can't brows on leaves sans being trapped in a strange ecstasy, Mishra plum in the mind. For example, Summer, while being in Dharamshala for teaching in primary school (where he stayed for 7 years), experienced the arrival of Autumn and obliteration of Monsoons in one paragraph and in the next, Winter comes and in the very next Spring comes. Ahh... Beautiful it was to peruse.

Ensuingly, here is my most fav quote of the novel.

"He was giving me his usual line about how everyone in the West thinks about nothing except pleasure and happiness. I was trying to make him realize that there is a different kind of pain attached to this kind of life. It comes with adulthood, like hair on your chest, a pain in the gut like the one your father probably had and alcohol and art would relieve it for a little while but it always returns. You could win the academic lottery, get tenure or whatever, but even that won't knock that pain out. And kind of pain no more and no less than you see here. People are people all over the world, and in America or anywhere else, and they really all want one thing and little else: Love, which is really lacking in life as we live it today."

Writers like Mishra feel great tendencies towards Culture. Here, in this novel too, He luminously examined the clash of cultures between Anand; An Indian young musician and Catherine; A French, Philosophy student.

Contrast through Miss West as she iterates to Samar in the end,

" 'His love for Catherine, his time in Paris: this was the greatest thing that could ever happen to him. He had only this past and he was trapped by it. Catherine could move on, but he was stuck. She is drifting, too, poor girl, but she is supported by her father's money, her culture, her background; they give her at least an idea of what she owes to herself.

'Anand, people like him, they can't afford such ideas; they don't know who they are; they don't know what they want; they are just trying hard not to sink into the misery and wretchedness they are born into. That's what he is doing now.

'But he was young when he first met Catherine. And when you are young you have these desires like everyone else; you're greedy for love, you feel then that the world owes you your happiness; you feel you are entitled it simply by being alive . . . '

A congruous novel for South Asians, Indeed.

Kiehl Christie says

I felt like this book assaulted me when I was finished with it. Mishra ruthlessly handles young Western travelers who establish themselves for long periods of time in foreign countries, thoroughly questioning their motives.

It is not a book that eliminates a desire to travel, but instead invites us to question how we travel: from how we view traveling, what we hope to gain from traveling, and how we interact and perceive and relate to locals in the areas that we travel.

Wonderful, thoughtful, effective. I read it when I was in India, and it couldn't have been more effective in that setting.

I encourage anyone who enjoys traveling to read this novel.

Baljit says

I liked most it except the v last chapter, as I did not see the point He was trying to make about his trip to Benares.
