

THE MAJOR MOTIFS IN THE ROMANTICS BY PANKAJ MISHRA

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ABSTRACT

Pankaj Mishra is known for his works such as "The Romantics: A Novel" published in 2000. Mishra's work often explores the intersections of cultures and the impact of globalization. He has been ordained as the next generation of India. His novel **The Romantics**(2000) is an ironic tale of people longing for fulfillment in cultures other than their own, won the 'Los Angeles Times Art Seidenbaum' award for first fiction. The Romantics is the story of a young Brahmin Samar, who comes to Benares to lose himself in books, but it becomes an unfeasible task for him by the entrance of Catherine and changes his secluded life. Presently my research paper focuses on different motifs and themes of the novel.

KEY WORDS: ironic, unfeasible, secluded, longing, fulfilment

Introduction:

In the novel **The Romantics** Pankaj Mishra touches on several themes, such as solitude, desolation and detachment or getting detached and desolated from ordinary man's life, his emotions, his friends and family as well as human connections, relationships particularly love. The themes of the novel The Romantics are dissatisfaction disappointment, sensuous romance, insecurity, immorality and immodesty. There is also philosophical theme which is for freedom of soul.

a. Solitude:

Throughout the novel solitude or loneliness of the characters pervades either physically or psychologically or both. The main character in the novel, Samar has suffered loneliness both physically and psychologically. But the weather made for a special kind of gloom. Samar has spent his schooldays at a missionary boarding school. **But there were my own needs, I had no friends: growing up alone, I had developed no skills for intimacy, or even ordinary**

camaraderie; friendships seemed to require from me a degree of self abnegation I could not achieve. (Page63) He has no close intimacy with his father. Though they are physically together they are psychologically far, even at the grave moment of grief at the loss of his mother. **I was alone in my grief now, whatever emotion my father felt, he was unlikely to share it with me (Page 69)**

How hard it was in that room, facing that calendar, my mother's possession all around me, the soft chanting of the ashram's imamate wafting in through the open windows, to deny the knowledge that the past that had given shape and coherence to my parents* lives was no longer available to me. (Page71)

Samar's father, who worked in PWD, seems to have suffered this loneliness. As he didn't wish to marry, he had never shared his feelings and emotions with his wife, whom he thought to be incapable. So there was wider communication gap between them. Though they are wife and husbands, their feelings and emotions are diverse. Never have they shared their emotions. Their communion is only that of body but not of mind. After death of Samar's mother, his father retired to Aurobindo ashram to have a secluded life, leaving his son, Samar lonely. There also Samar's father experienced physical as well as psychological loneliness, having lost his wife. Samar's mother, who had been neglected and left alone psychologically at home, had been to ashram to lead a peaceful life. She expressed her loneliness and longing for affectionate communion in her tears when she was bed ridden. Then she told Samar out of depths of desolation. Samar wondered to understand that his mother did not wish to live any longer, as she felt loneliness and grief.

The Hindu calendar that hung in his mother's room had been a realm of existence over and above her sorrow and disappointment. To get relieved from her loneliness, desolation and grief she celebrated festivals and followed fasting days. They had brought a subliminal order to her time on earth, they had measured out and made bearable, her life.

Similarly, various other characters did suffer with loneliness either physical or psychological or both. Miss West; the English woman who had been living in India since a long time. She was alone, to get relieved from her loneliness, she used to arrange parties with her friends, Catherine, Sarah, Mark and Debbie. She suffered physical loneliness as she was desolated. Despite the company of her friends, she was alone psychologically. Catherine, who was living with her Indian boy friend, Anand, did suffer psychological loneliness. Though both Catherine

and Anand were living together for a long time, both could not understand each other's feelings or emotions or even their cultures and family backgrounds.

b. Detachment:

Throughout the novel, Mishra flirts with the concept of detachment as a Hindu way out of problems but denounced it eventually. Samar's father retires to the Autobindo Ashram after his wife passes away and eventually Samar hides himself in Dharmasala to get away from the memories of Benares and Catherine, with whom he had spent a memorable holiday in Kalpi. Yet, after seven years, he happens to meet Mark in Dharmasala. This sudden and a chance meeting with Mark makes Samar doubt his own choices, disturbs what seems to be good and comfortable for Samar till then.

Samar in any case comes across as a detached individual. It is probably because he is also the character through whom Mishra views the restrictions of the caste and in that sense seems to represent a part of Mishra's own personality. This detached approach makes Samar an extremely wishy-washy character who just seems to blunder along life's by-lanes, going where his destiny takes him, with minimal dissent. The only time he seems to have emotions, is when he experiences a high during and after his tryst with Catherine.

C. Sensuous Romance:

Romanticism is a rebellion against classicism, a sense of struggle between the dream of heavenly perfection and experience of human inadequacy and guilt. It is magical, dramatic, surprising and full of adventure. Romanticism believes in the goodness of humanity. It encourages the development of naturalistic pride and uses everyday diction

The movement stressed strong emotion as a source of aesthetic experience, placing new emphasis on such emotions as trepidation, horror and awe—especially that which is experienced in confronting the sublimity of untamed nature and its picturesque qualities, both new aesthetic categories. It elevated folk art and custom to something noble, and argued for a natural epistemology of human activities as conditioned by nature in the form of language, custom and usage.

Catherine's charming beauty fascinated Samar passionately. A sort of sense of sensuousness that charms any young man of Samar's age and thus makes him completely engrossed in adoring her beauty.

She is very pretty. Now looked at Catherine in the light of Miss West's remark, and the word 'pretty' came to be crystaized by the lovely vulnerability of her face, the clear Olive skin, the large hazel eyes that looked out at the world with a mixture of uncertainty and sadness, the full lower lip, the dark wavy hair that formed a perfect inverted over her forehead. (Page 16&17)

As it happens, it is at one of Miss West's parties that his life is altered forever. He meets the lovely Catherine, daughter of Paris banker, who is trying to find herself in the relative poverty of Benares, living with her current boyfriend, Anand, a struggling Indian sitar player. Catherine's tall beauty instantly captivates Samar, and he becomes obsessed with her, fastening onto every detail of her otherworldly habits. He welcomes the opportunity to accompany her around Benares, falls into a routine of visiting her and Anand in their apartment and spending bewildering evenings with her Persian friends.

There is, in short, romance all about, but what has wormed into Samar is love although it takes time for him to recognize it, so inexperienced is he in matters of the heart. As he reads his books, ponders his rebellious new Brahman acquaintance, and chases after the mysteries of the West, he falls helplessly, irretrievably in love with Catherine. He follows her at first along Himalayan ether, where chance completes the transformation.

During one of her spells of melancholy silence, Catherine reached out with an avidity that filled her with mirth and left Samar s feeling embarrassed. Samar had no words to describe his deep sense of sensuousness, passion and uncontrollable deep physical urge. In his words:

It is hard for me to describe the physical aspect of what happened next. It was made memorable only my incompetence in everything that followed upon Catherine's first disencumbering kiss the first nervous exploration, the fumbling with buttons and hooks, the awkward impasses and shameful lonely climaxes. Even if I could describe it without being meretricious, I would still be false to my memory of the event, which method at only a very crud level the usual adolescent fantasies I'd had about the savoring of unknown pleasures. (Page 135)

It pleased me to hear that, I was beginning to long for some reassurance of her affection for me. I wanted to be alone with her again, and it was with a thumping heart that I ascended the staircase with the familiar mural of Rama and Sita. (Page 145)

Further the immodest and illegal physical contacts of Miss West with chokidar at Kalpi and her great aunt's immodest relationship with men are exposed. Once Samar recollected the words of Miss West about her great aunt she told me about her new connection with Benares. She had earlier mentioned to me a great aunt of her who was married briefly to a captain in the British Indian army. Now she had come to know - through old letters discovered and read by the cousin in England - that this great aunt had visited Benares in 1945 and fallen under the spell of a famous Tantra Practitioner. She had stayed with this man for few months. It was an outrageous thing for a British woman of her time to do. Her marriage to the army captain had broken up soon afterwards and she had returned to England to a series of loves. She had finally died in Norfolk, alone, a few weeks ago.

d. Immorality and Immodesty:

This is focused through the characters of Samar and Catherine. Their staying together at Kalpi, enjoying sensual love and quenching physical lust is the best example of this theme.

And that Miss West wanted to marry that man, have children and settle down. But, as he wouldn't have his wife, they could not marry and that it was a hopeless situation for her. She had also revealed about Christopher, while she was describing the image of Christopher and Miss West's affair with him, it gave him the image of life and personality so compromised by passion Samar tried to is cover that complete fulfillment of Miss West's confused image that he had of her.

I was troubled, because Miss West's disappointments seem to point at an even harsher fact; the cruel seeming asymmetry between desire and satisfaction that could exist in the most privileged of liver. And this is where Paul Bowles comes in: Like the American threesome in Bowles's *The Sheltering Sky*, pulled seductively, inexorably, and - in the end -tragically into the heart of Africa, Samar is titillated, mesmerized, and then entirely possessed by another culture, another morality. (Paul Bowles, 1949). The twist for us, in Mishra's *The Romantics*, is that it is the West that corrupts, becomes the fatal morgana - the shimmering phantasm that toys with a sensibility, curls into an innocent's brain.

e. Choice:

When Samar has come to know the views of Europeans and Americans about their lives, he has been astounded. They have their own choices that are open, that is, choosing to live in another country, choosing to convert to another religion, choosing what their life will be to fit

their self- image. So, Mishra ultimately has concluded his book with the perfection that the Westerners are privileged, more than anything else, because they have these choices. Consequently their impact on the people they meet in India is compounded by their inability to understand that other people don't have these choices

f. Gap between cultures.

This is the tendency to exoticise other cultures, and the way it feels to be the subject of this is brilliantly highlighted in a conversation between an American and a European, where the French woman responds rather that she is missing the point. At the same time, Mishra suggests that human nature is not at all that different -comparing the lives of young men moving to the big city of Benares to the characters in Flaubert's Sentimental Education. The small unnoticed tragedies of thwarted hopes and ideals. The Romantics highlights the ironies of life of the people in India, but, Mishra does so unusually for the subject without any sneering. The contradictions are inherent in their situation rather than arising from any lack of good will on their past.

g. Philosophy:

The Character of Sarah, an American has converted to Buddhism. Debbie, girl friend of Mark, who lives with all ease and freedom, wants to be converted to Buddhism. Further, there is longing for freedom of soul through the character of Samafs father .What he had always desired was freedom: freedom from all bonds that tie one down to the vanities of the world, freedom from all duties and responsibilities to other people.

In his fathers view The world Is maya; illusion. (Page 215)

There are also a lot of other things which make one like The Romantics. Firstly, the fascinating as well as moving descriptions of India are simple, but very evocative - either it is about the cities or the country side or the mountains. To illustrate - the description of a rickshaw ride in the rain; "The rain flowed down the windscreen, which the puller kept wiping with a rag that lay on the dashboard. Gleaming vivid for one moment, the streets dissolved into smudgy fluorescent colours the next passing scooters and auto rickshaws kept spraying thick jets of muddy water the waterlogged road into the back seat". The descriptions, and Samar's drifting, introspective nature, make this a book that one needs to read slowly and savour. Yet, there are a lot of incidents which seem as if they ought to be significant, and couldn't be figured out what that significance is all about.

Thus Pankaj Mishra has successfully touched all the possible themes in the novel through the characters of **The Romantics**.

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