

Making of an Indian English Novel: A Study of the Romantics: A Novel

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Abstract

Indian English Novels are generally successful at the market. More and more writers try their hand in Indian English Novels after the thumping success of *The Midnight's Children* and *The God of Small Things*. Veteran literary critics like M.K. Naik observes that Successful Indian English Novels have a formula for gaining popularity. In this study Pankaj Mishra's *The Romantics: A Novel* is probed into to find out if it has such ingredients of success in it.

KEYWORDS: global market, quick money, easy fame, selling India, comprador intelligentsia.

Introduction

Indian English Novels have become fashionable and popular in the entire gamut of Indian English Literature. But the subjectivity of Indian English Novels is highly problematized as the very intention of writing novels in the English Language itself is often controversial. Meenakshi Mukherjee says: "If the anxiety of Indianness in Raja Rao, Anand and Narayan came out of their own desire to be rooted, the anxiety of the new generation may be attributed to the pressures of the global market place" (98). In this argument, the very commitment of the writers is questioned. Indian English writers seem to write only for the quick money and easy fame which their works could fetch.

Many of the writers are diasporic or live both in the Orient and in the Occident as Jon Mee observes: "It is true that many of these novelists are foreign-returned or divide their lives between India and other places. It is also true that marketers of the Indian novel in English have also shown great canniness. There has developed, over the past few years, a sense that India sells abroad" (335). It is an intellectual hypocrisy of the writers to pretend as projecting the issues of the third world while they themselves are least interested in the periphery. In fact many of them write to suit the dictates of the Western palate and use post modernist modes, indigenous fables and legends just for the sake of making it saleable.

It is the case of writers about whom Appiah observed "...a comprador intelligentsia: a relatively small, Western-style, Western-trained group of writers and thinkers, who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery" (348). In the Indian context, anecdotes, characters and Sanskrit words from Indian classics are used in a very shallow and flippant way as if such treatments are baits to invite western attention. While observing the exaggerated experiences projected as the essential Indianness in some of the recent popular Indian English novels, Sheobhushan Shukla and Anu Shukla in their introduction to *Indian English Novel in the Nineties* write:

Even while narrating life of the metropolis, and its wondrous dailyness, they appear to invite the suspicion of hype and exhibitionism. Everyone knows that people do have sexual

perversities but the type of ones to be found in the novels of Khushwant Singh and Shobha De are nothing but blue-film montage. It is not the question of sexual frankness and we are not shy of sex. Consider Khajuraho and even Kalidas's description of the breasts of the goddess Parvati in Kumarasambhavam. But what we get out of it is aesthetic pleasure and not "vibhatsa" (revulsion). Similarly various novelists like Vikram Chandra and Shashi Tharoor have tried to reinvent the ancient myths in the context of modern times. The entry of the gods Ganesha, Hanuman and Yama into Red Earth and Pouring Rain is half parodic in a postmodernist way (Are we postmodern?). But does it serve any purpose. This kind of trend can be seen earlier in Shashi Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel where the uses of the tale of Mahabharata to make his narration of contemporary India. His use of allegory, however, lacks depth and intensity, the things which touch the heart. (4)

They also tell that the authenticity of such novels appear to be dubious and such writers appear "to be selling India to the West and highlighting those aspects which are bizarre, are too visible, but not her essential attributes" (5). Naik in A History of Indian English Literature puts almost the same arguments in a nut shell, giving the very recipe of successful Indian English Novels and that itself forms the premise of the study:

... often repeated charge against Indian English Literature is that its practitioners wrote with an eye on the foreign reader and hence try to provide stereo-types of both character and situation, which attract this reader. Like Benjamin Franklin's famous recipe for a New England elegy, the recipe for a successful Indian novel in English is, according to these critics, now very well patented. Take an assortment of sadhus, fakirs, maharajas, agitationists, Westernized Indian men and traditional Indian women – either pious paragons or seductive sirens according to your mood and choice – and let them perform against the background of communal riots and nationalistic uprisings; throw in a couple of tiger-hunts, rope-tricks, snakes and elephants; and a pinch of mysticism if you carry it off successfully – and there you have your Indian English masterpiece. (287)

Ingredients of Indian Flavour

The Romantics: A Novel has many of the ingredients which are considered as part of the formula to concoct a successful Indian English novel. Miss West narrates the account of her great-aunt who visited Benares in 1945. The great-aunt fell "under the spell of a famous Tantra practitioner. She had stayed with this man for a 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 lovers" (159). Miss West continues: ". . . I am quite sure she had an affair with the Tantric. Those Tantrics are great experts on sex, aren't they? I am sure the men she slept with in England felt themselves blessed" (159).

There are also references about the great fascination for the Himalayas which is the abode of many yogis, about the young, handsome and well-educated lone renunciant priest at a temple in a remote fold of the Himalayas (128). Holy places and bits of Hindu philosophy also find place in the novel. Benares is described as the "holiest of

pilgrimage sites that Hindus for millennia have visited in order to attain liberation from the cycle of rebirths ...” (3). The township is “destroyed and rebuilt so many times during centuries of Muslim and British rule” and is “the abode of Shiva, the god of perpetual creation and destruction” (3). The varied customs and sects in the celebration of Shivratri at Banares are described:

All around me, and in the far distance, swarmed a crowd of pilgrims, with not a patch of uncovered ground to be seen anywhere, pilgrims surging into the main road from all directions, through narrow lanes and maze-like alleys, from between houses leaning into each other; pilgrims holding marigolds and red hibiscuses, brass and steel platters filled with lit diyas and sweets and vermilion powder, pilgrims wearing pink and purple saris, crimson and white turbans, glossy silk and threadbare cotton, pilgrims ochre-robed and naked – ash-smearred, matted-haired Naga sadhus with gleaming tridents, their long penises slackly swinging as they walked towards the ghat – pilgrims everywhere, chanting slogans in praise of Shiva as they went down the steps, past the coconut and flower sellers, the anxious-eyed cows and the fat priests under their tattered straw umbrellas, to the river, throwing rose petals over their heads, up towards where the monkeys balanced on electric poles, quiet and watchful. (160-161)

Even the narration has a dreamy quality which effects a spell on the readers. Banares which is “destroyed and rebuilt so many times during centuries of Muslim and British rule” is described as “the abode of Shiva, the god of perpetual creation and destruction” (3). The bathing “ghats” in Banares are vividly described:

The river gleamed and glinted in the mid-afternoon sun. Bright red and yellow kites hung high in the clean blue sky. Children appeared on the bathing ghats; the uneven cobblestone steps came to be chalk-marked with hopscotch rectangles; scrawny drug pushers lurked on temple porches where chess players sat hunched over tattered cardboards; pilgrims dressed and undressed all day long in a slowly turning kaleidoscope of Indian colours: the South Indians in their purple Kanjeevaram silk saris, the visitors from Rajasthan unwinding the spools of yellow and crimson turbans, the widows from Bengal in their austere white cotton. In the evenings, the funeral pyres in the distant north of the city were like glow-worms in the gathering dusk.(7)

But the description of the journey of Catherine and Samar to a remote dreamy place in the folds of the Himalayas and their physical consummation seem a little bit of improbability. It seems rather like someone’s secret libidinal dream coming true.

Exaggerated Overtones of Social and Private Life

In the various aspects of social and private life also some nuanced differences can be observed. The West seems to maintain a general poise in behaviour in public place, while social life in India is more colourful with an overt expression of feelings and emotions. The overtones of colour in the Indian ways of dressing itself, is notable as a reflection of overt emotional expressions and associated noisy milieu. The novel gives the description of a sight from the bathing ghats of Banares: “...pilgrims dressed and undressed all day long in a slowly turning kaleidoscope of Indian colours:

the South Indians in their purple Kanjeevaramsilk saris, the visitors from Rajasthan unwinding the spools of yellow and crimson turbans, the widows from Bengal in their austere white cotton” (7). A morning in Benares is described by Samar: “I got up early, awakened, more often than not, by the sounds from nearby houses: radios blaring devotional music, crying babies, wet laundry being slapped against the bathroom floor, the voices of people queuing up before the municipal tap in the alley below, water cannonading into plastic buckets” (20).

There is also a dream faculty in the Indian psyche and sometimes it leads to impracticality. Catherine complains Samar that Anand is impractical (113). At the same time there is a curious detachment in personal relationship in India as seen in the novel. Mr. and Mrs. Pandey apparently lead a life without much of an interaction. Mr. Pandey stays in the ground floor and Mrs. Pandey in the first floor. Mrs. Pandey claims that she “...had long cut off all contact with her husband, and claims not to have gone downstairs for over fifteen years. (4). The Pandeys are apparently cross with their son Arjun and towards the end of the novel the Pandeys die almost simultaneously and their son is said to have a dubious role in it. Even Samar and his father lack an intimate friendly relationship. His father and mother also lack the warmth of a life-long partnership. Samar remembers his condition after the death of his mother: “I was alone in my grief now; whatever emotion my father felt, he was unlikely to share it with me” (69).

In Anand’s case his parents could not understand his relationship with Catherine. “Patroness, girlfriend, fiancée: they all would have been alien and difficult concepts for them” (50). Samar says that even he could not fully come in terms with the concept of “parties”. “The word itself brought to mind noisy, half-naked revelers; it suggested the kind of empty frivolity and moral laxity of which I had been brought up to disapprove. My view of Miss. West altered; I now saw her as an organizer of parties” (9).

Sectarian, caste or religion based, politics and caste discrimination especially in north India are depicted in the novel, *The Romantics*. In the beginning, Samar is helped by a Brahmin, Panditji, as a “fellow Brahmin” who had fallen on hard times. Panditji gives him accommodation on an “Indian rent” (4). Later at the Banaras University, caste feeling in routine life is clearly shown. Vijay, a Brahmin student politician and Rajesh a University student who associate themselves with some local politicians and a criminal gang are depicted as protecting Brahmin students at the University from low-caste “lumpens” and “antisocial elements” (23). Rajesh, almost middle aged, has six degrees in the subjects like Literature, Commerce, journalism and Law:

Too old now to play an active part in student politics, he nevertheless displayed an elder-brotherly solicitude towards the Brahmin students at the university. He lobbied hard with the administration on their behalf to postpone exams, or to reinstate an expelled student; he worked overtime on the labyrinthine university bureaucracy to get more Brahmin students admitted into university hostels. He asked for nothing in return from those he favoured other than their votes for Brahmin candidates in elections to the student union. (22)

However the novel shows that Indians generally have a sort of admiration for the Europeans and it may be part of the Indian snobbery. When Catherine and Samar reach the Maharaja’s cottage at Mussorie, the staff there give due respect for

Catherine but they explicitly ridicule Samar (110). At the same time there are instances in which the westerners are being exploited for monetary benefits. Mr. Pandey for instance has got two different rates as rent for his rooms; one rate for the Indians and presumably a high rate for the foreigners.

The novel also shows how generation after generation, the people drift themselves away from ethnic culture and how they get themselves alienated. For instance, Samar's ancestors were Brahmins who strictly adhered to their customs and traditions. They all had the tradition of: "studentship in Benares, adulthood and marriage, late-middle-age detachment and then the final renunciation followed by a retreat to the Himalayas" (67). When their family fell on evil days Samar's father took a job in the Public Works Department and later Samar studied in a mediocre Christian run school:

The serenity of the old Brahmin world in which his family had lived for centuries was even more remote from me. I had an intimation of it on Sunday mornings, when my father, freshly bathed and bare-torsoed, would sit on a tiger skin rug before a fragrant fire of sandalwood and recite Vedic hymns in an approximation of a much grander ritual his ancestors had performed for millennia. I felt great reverence and awe for these ancient practices. But at the same time I could feel my own life had drifted apart from them; it had attached itself to another constellation of desires and reverences. (68)

Samar's mother also has a world of her own, the world of her personal beliefs and customs. Samar remembers:

... it was not until I came across the heavily annotated Hindu calendar she kept hung in her room all her life that I realized how inviolably whole that world had been to her. It had been a realm of existence over and above her sorrows and disappointments on the material plane, world with its own rhythms and seasons, virtues and habits. Magh, Aasharh, Phagun, Sankrant, Amavasya, NauRatri: the sonorous poetry of these Sanskrit names, the musical chiming of these months, festivals and fasting days – they had brought a subliminal order to her time on earth; they had measured out, and made bearable, her life. (70-71)

Samar finds out that "... the knowledge that the past that had given shape and coherence to my [Samar's] parents' lives was no longer available to me [Samar]" (71). It is also observed that Rekha the Indian girl doing her undergraduate at Berkeley, California has almost completely westernized herself and is co-habiting with Mark. There is also a reference to the odd complaint that Christian boarding schools help the quick westernization process among the younger generation. Deepa the aunt of Priya says: "... she went to an exclusive Christian boarding school and came out completely westernized" (198).

There is also reference to the Hindu-Muslim riot which occurred as an aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Samar after his disillusionment with Catherine wanders all across India and tells that he saw:

... burned or scorched buildings, charred cars, buses and scooters, upturned carts with missing rubber tyres that, I would read in the papers, had been used as 'flaming garlands', looted shops showing the wretched brick behind the now destroyed paneling, shards of broken

windows on empty roads and, here and there on the ground, faint grey stains of unwashed blood.

I saw all this – the clumsy brutality, the rage, the dereliction, the damage I had so far read about in the papers – and the great grief felt was reduced gradually to wordless fear. I kept telling myself as consolation: this isn't my world. . . (216-217).

Samar considers violence not as a substance of his real being. There are also a few reflections which tell us how the West looks up on the East. Catherine's friend Jacques has a unique concept that "every Indian was axiomatically a Gandhian, and the country on the whole an Edenic setting of self-sufficient villages and their cotton-spinning non-violent inhabitants (90).

Coloured Concepts of Romance and Sex

A great difference, as portrayed in the novels, exists in matters of romance and sex as far as the Orient and the Occident are concerned. Generally love, romance and sex among the unmarried youth in India are considered as abnormal deviations, as it is depicted in the novel, *The Romantics*. Catherine once asks Samar if he ever had been in love. Samar's reflections indicate this:

I had lived so far away from human contact of the sort Catherine implied. I hadn't known any woman apart from those in my family. Of love and romance, the less regulated but natural order of things, I knew only from books, and I followed other people of my background in suspecting it of being not natural. In the world I had known, romantic love was looked down upon as a kind of sensual derangement that briefly affected insufficiently acculturated or Brahmanized youth, and then left them broken and disillusioned soon afterwards. (132)

When Samar goes to Catherine and Anand frequently, he senses something fishy in his desire to meet Catherine frequently. "I sensed something coarse in it, and unhealthy. That scruple faded in time, but was never to disappear altogether" (44).

Romantic love is looked down as sensual derangement in the orthodox Indian society. "In this world, men and women were ushered into marriage after their elders had matched horoscopes and convinced each other about their respective social and financial status. Love was supposed to follow marriage, not the other way round; and it mattered little if it didn't" (132). Samar's father seems to have never succeeded in making a fulfilling partnership with his wife. That void perhaps was filled up later with the intimacy with Deepa. At the same time the novel hints that undesirable habits and emotions have gripped the modern youth of Educational Institutions. When Catherine and Anand pass the street, Samar notices, "...the lecherous malevolence of the student idlers who usually hung out at the adjacent tea shacks, gossiping about, and virtually goosing, every passing girl" (43).

When it comes to the act of physical love, after his novice experience of the physical love with Catherine, Samar feels a sense of guilt when he faces Anand (146). At the same time Catherine has no scruples and she skillfully manages to tackle an uneasy Anand when she returns from Mussoorie with Samar and insists Samar not to let Anand know it as it would be disastrous for him (139). She falls time and again in moods of remorse and self-pity, but that is because of her own apprehensions

regarding her relationship with Anand. But once back in Banares with Anand, she takes care not to involve with Samar as she does not want to hurt Anand.

After leaving for France with Anand, Catherine in a letter to Samar, analyses her physical relation with Samar as mischievous adventure (210) and as “perversion of human emotions” (210). Catherine also admits that she feels ashamed of herself and of Samar who encouraged Catherine for the whole affair. She regrets that she destroyed the trust Anand had in her, the person she loves most in her life (211). She even accuses that Samar’s advice to acquire more detachment especially in her relation with Anand was with an evil motive. Anand proves no Ravisankar and becomes a miserable partner for her and soon their relationship breaks off and Anand returns to India to lead a very pathetic life in the slums of Delhi. Catherine keeps on changing her boy friends (272). But Anand was devastated with the memories of Catherine while he got shorter and shorter notes from Catherine (273).

Samar’s own experience is also strikingly similar to that of Anand. After his first physical intercourse with Catherine, life has changed for once and all for him. He also pines for her love and for letters and her assurances of love. As long as she was in Banares he could not even go to Pondicherry to meet his father who he doubted was on his death-bed. It was when she finalized her journey to France with Anand that he leaves for Pondicherry. After receiving her second letter accusing him for their physical involvement and expressing her desire not to be in touch with Samar anymore, he also becomes a haunted man and he wants to escape from his past and to acquire equanimity of mind which he hopes to get from the serene and secluded place Dhamasala and also from the idyllic happiness of teaching in a primary school there.

Anand and Samar’s plight show the Indian hyper sensitivity and emotional nature when compared with the more or less casual attitude of the Westerners in matters of love and sex. Miss. West’s invective in one morning;” It’s all a waste, isn’t it? Such a fucking waste”(38), her question to Samar if he liked Catherine(39) and her description of Ramchand the boatman as “dishy”(38) are unsettling experiences for Samar which show the rather flippant and casual approach of the westerners in such matters. Miss. West herself is in love with an English man who is already married with children and she spends almost all her life in the hope that she could settle down with the man. But the man prefers only secret conjugation and not a marriage.

The words “my Indian boy friend” which Catherine uses to introduce Anand to her western visitors and friends clearly show her attitude to the relationship. In her relationship with the Indian boy-friends, the elements of the typical western ways of charity work are involved. Without realizing the Indian sentiments she tries to console both and both become miserable in their own way. Samar later wonders if his time with her had only served her as a relief from her anxieties about Anand (173). She herself once admitted to Samar that “Different men at different times had seemed to offer an escape from the emotional sterility she thought she had grown up with, and time and again she had succumbed...” (133) and so in one way these involvements are rather parts of her escapism.

Conclusion

The Romantics shows westerners more or less as practical people while Indians are shown as colourful, emotional and even hyper-sensitive. At the same time Indians are depicted as dreamy and orthodox people. Parties and co-habitation are alien concepts to many Indians. It also shows that Indians generally have an admiration for

the white people although the whites are exploited at times for financial profits. The novel also hints that generation after generation, the Indians drift away from their ethnic culture and Christian run schools are allegedly responsible for this change to a great extent.

The novel also registers a strong resentment against the demolition of Babri Masjid by fascist forces and declares it is not the ideal world one would wish for. The novel also suggests that love, romance and sex are considered as sensual derangement at least by some Indians. It also hints that even an unethical thought would create prick of conscience in the minds of righteous people. Love is for them something to happen after marriage and marriage is determined by matching of the horoscope, financial status and social status of the families. But the youth in India are depicted as generally lustful.

Westerners are shown as very practical in matters of love and sex. They are not bothered about the morality of the acts but are worried only about the secrecy of the whole affair. The Indian lovers seem to have a lot of emotional entanglements and mental worries whereas the western counterparts simply pass it over and proceed to novel experiences. All these arguments may be considered as little bit hyperbolic, but they could not be adjudged as deliberate concoctions of exaggerated improbabilities.

In short the novel under study does not yield to the allegation that the Indian English Writer essentializes exaggerated trifles to make quick money and fame. Further, one is also reminded of the argument of Meenakshi Mukherjee in this context: "Contrary to popular belief, not all of them [Indian English Novels] achieve fame abroad, and most are read by numerically fewer people than read a bhasa novel" (80).

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