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BOOKS OF THE TIMES

BOOKS OF THE TIMES; Shedding Illusions Of Youth by the Ganges

By MICHIKO KAKUTANI

THE ROMANTICS

By Pankaj Mishra

260 pages. Random House. $23.95.

Pankaj Mishra's impressive first novel, "The Romantics," reads like a variation on Flaubert's "Sentimental Education," though it is set not in 19th-century France but in India in the 1980's. Like Flaubert's classic, "The Romantics" concerns the adventures of a young provincial who arrives in the big city to seek his fortune and falls in love with an unavailable woman. And like Flaubert's classic, it features a supporting cast of students, dilettantes and bohemians suffering from self-absorption, disillusionment and frustration with the fickleness of life.

Although Mr. Mishra has clearly taken inspiration from "Sentimental Education," he has managed to write a novel that showcases his own distinctive voice, a voice that fuses the lapidary precision of Flaubert with the meditative lyricism of Waugh's "Brideshead Revisited," a voice that's alternately wry and ruminative, meticulous and expansive. In "The Romantics" he draws a finely observed portrait of the city of Benares, one of the holiest of pilgrimage sites for Hindus, and the many small Himalayan towns that are magnets for foreigners and spiritual tourists.

The narrator of "The Romantics" is a Brahmin intellectual named Samar who is looking back on his youth, those days when he had just arrived in Benares and was trying to decide what to do with his life. Samar, at the time, was a shy young man who processed the world through books. With each volume he finishes, he thinks, "I entered into what I felt to be an exalted bond with its writer, to whom I gave all the care and attentiveness I could not bring to human relationships."

At 19, Samar has never had a girlfriend, has never even flirted with a girl. In the world he grew up in, he explains, "romantic love was looked down upon as a kind of sensual derangement that briefly affected insufficiently acculturated or Brahminized youth and then left them broken and disillusioned soon afterward."

In Benares, Samar's hermetic existence is gradually cracked open by the tensions he feels between the disparate worlds he comes to inhabit. There is the Brahmin world of his ancestors, which followed in the "well-worn Hindu grooves" of "studentship in Benares, adulthood and marriage, late middle-age detachment and then the final renunciation followed by a retreat to the Himalayas." It is a serene, highly regulated world that fractured for Samar's father in the aftermath of independence in 1947, and that feels even more remote to Samar, who grew up with cricket, Tintin comics and the books of Enid Blyton.

Then there is the tumultuous world of politics and sectarian violence in Benares -- a world of student radicals, criminal gangs and restless, discontented young men hoping to escape their impoverished pasts. It is a world represented for Samar by his mysterious friend Rajesh, a man who enjoys "Godfather-like status" among many of the students at the Hindu University and who seems to have dark connections to the Benares underworld.

Finally, for Samar, there is the alluring, alien world of expatriates he gets to know through his neighbor, Miss West, a melancholy English woman whose longstanding affair with a married man has brought her to Benares. At one of Miss West's parties, Samar meets Mark, an American who at various times in his life has been a "poet, dishwasher, painter, Tibetan Buddhist, carpenter and traveler"; Mark's girlfriend, Debbie, another American who says she is just "passing through" India; and a wealthy Frenchwoman named Catherine whose aimless life and hectic love affairs recall Lady Brett Ashley from "The Sun Also Rises" by Hemingway.

Although Catherine is supposedly in love with an Indian musician named Anand, Samar instantly develops a crush on her, and he begins hanging out at her apartment. Gradually he becomes her friend and confidant, and the two soon find themselves vacationing alone at a country house in the mountains. During their trip they become lovers, and Samar quickly develops a full-blown romantic obsession. His days of living quietly through books, it seems, have come to an end.

When Catherine breaks off their affair, however, Samar makes the precipitous decision to change his life. He takes a job teaching English to Tibetan children in a remote Himalayan village and sets about trying to forget Catherine and his past. For seven years -- until a chance meeting with a friend from Benares -- his time in the mountains will be divided "between unchanging routine and solitude." Samar will hold himself apart from other people, "the gratifications and torments of their personal lives, their desires, fears and insecurities," and he will instead attempt to live "neutrally, on the surface." He will try to convince himself that this "detached, eventless life" somehow "wasn't very far from matching the old Brahmin idea of retreat."

In "The Romantics," Mr. Mishra has created an affecting Bildungsroman while at the same time exploring the clash of cultures in contemporary India. Like Flaubert, he seems to possess a simultaneous fascination with and wariness of romanticism, and he uses that ambivalence to explore the ways in which people from different backgrounds glamorize foreign cultures, be it Americans romanticizing the mysteries of India or Indians romanticizing the freedoms of the West. He has written a resonant and highly subtle novel.

Photo: Pankaj Mishra. (Pradip Krishen)