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How Flaubert can change your life

Aamer Hussein welcomes a lyrical novel of sentimental education on the banks of the Ganges

The Romantics by Pankaj Mishra (Picador, £14.99, 277pp)

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Indefatigable reader and autodidact, Samar, the dolefully endearing narrator of Pankaj Mishra's first novel, "gobbles down books without any sense of the larger civilisation that lay behind them". Gauche and vulnerably lonely, in Benares where he studies, he learns from a chance encounter with the works of Edmund Wilson to read great books both for their artistry and for those historical backgrounds they illuminate. Reread under Wilson's phantom tutelage, Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* yields another dimension: it unveils lives and loves that go nowhere, dreams that self-destruct, "a chilling intimation of the life that lay ahead".

Samar identifies with the novel's protagonist; he also, in one of Mishra's neat cultural conflations, recognises in Flaubert's bleak vision the fatalism of the Hindu philosophy embodied in the sacred river city. Caught in an elliptical relationship with Rajesh, a shady student demagogue with whom he shares little more than the burden of their Brahmin-ness, Samar hears him proclaim that our task is to learn to live somewhere in between illusion and the void.

Samar hands Rajesh Flaubert and Wilson. While one experiences in the first person the philosophical lessons of *maya* and *sunyata*, the other discovers in Flaubert a bitter portrait of the "self-deception, falsehood, sycophancy and bribery" of his lower-middle-class provincial Indian life.

This is only one rich vein in a novel which, while it sometimes meanders like its protagonist's fancies, demands a nuanced reading to uncover its network of echoes and recurrences. Perhaps the most potentially popular of these is the European presence in search of an "Indian" truth. Mishra quietly pits this against a geophysical truth that manifests itself from the Himalayas to the Indian ocean, always returning, like a reincarnated soul, to the banks of the Ganges.

Characters disappear and reappear at random. There's Miss West, Samar's housemate, and a bevy of colleagues, students, acquaintances. The melancholy of Samar's widower father suggests one possible reason for the son's introversion and desperate yearning to relate. Most significant in Samar's life - albeit briefly - the Frenchwoman Catherine seduces him, during an escapade in the mountains away from her musician lover. She initiates his sentimental education, only to despatch a curt vote of dismissal to his temporary abode at the sea.

True to life again, Samar's feelings of rejection are far more poignant than his first love. Mishra straightfacedly portrays adolescent fervour without a trace of irony - a quality which, perhaps in tribute to its hero's self-deprecating earnestness and honesty, is largely absent from his novel.

Though slightly over-long and crowded with minor players, *The Romantics* is an intriguing combination of casual grace and emotional intensity, peppered with discreet social comment on caste, class, sectarian strife, the state of the nation. This allusive novel (the relative merits of Kundera and Marquez are debated; the poets Faiz and Iqbal are cited in Urdu and English) simultaneously mocks its own erudition when Samar, disappointed, retreats to the mountains where he repudiates literature in favour of documentary texts. (Until, of course, he rediscovers


Flaubert.)

The enigmatic Rajesh somewhat unexpectedly emerges as the novel's most compelling presence: a sort of neo-Existentialist anti-hero, a committed Hindu who paradoxically seeks answers in Urdu lyric poetry and ends up as a criminal. He's a mirror of Samar's secret fears; and his example forces Samar to recommence his stalled emotional journey. Though it occupies a relatively short part of the novel and is narrated in shards, the relationship between the Brahmin boys is probably the first time that the fate of the Brahmin in contemporary India becomes the close-to-central theme of fiction.

Mishra, like so many contemporary first novelists, is no newcomer. He has a reputation as an essayist and travel writer - a persona to the fore in the first fifth of *The Romantics*, which has an aimless feel until Samar's voice gains its peculiar inflection. Mishra is better at description than at simile: comparisons of sea to tin foil and tea gardens to crushed silk don't convince. He never entirely overcomes a journalist's tendency to over-explain. But this ceases to be jarring once Samar's painful honesties engage our attention.

There are no grand solutions; only a gentle exhortation to connect the disparate elements of one's life, "gaze with a fresher eye at things grown dim in memory". Hearteningly different from the tricksiness and posturing of much recent Indian writing, this is a charming dÄ©but, which makes a virtue of its studied simplicity.

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