

East West Encounter in the Romantics: A Novel: Clash of Philosophical and Pragmatic Logics

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Abstract – The Romantics: A Novel, depicts the protagonist Samar, a Brahmin boy more or less rooted in the Indian traditional mind set but at the same time drifted away to a great extent by the type of education prevailing in India. His western education tends him to be in the company of some characters from the West who are on a sojourn in India. The confrontation ends up in disillusionment and dejection. A probe into the reasons bring out the nuances of the divide between the Orient and the Occident.

Key Words: Oriental Philosophy, Pragmatic Logic, Dichotomies, Materialism, Detachment, Equanimity.

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The title of the novel, written by Pankaj Mishra, becomes very significant as it offers multiple layers of meaning to the text. The severe romantic afflictions of the protagonist, the romantic connection of the two prominent characters Catherine and Anand, the romantic entanglement of Miss West, the romantic crush of Priya, the place of romance in the life of Samar's father, the romantic partners of Mark, together with the strange and often unrealistic inclinations of different characters towards spirituality, Buddhism, socialism, yoga, occult systems and mysteries in Hindu tradition, the reverie like narrative technique and the exotic settings do full justice to the title. In fact all these elements contribute to the essence of subjectivity in the sum totality of the novel.

PHILOSOPHICAL AND PRAGMATIC LOGICS OF THE ORIENT AND THE OCCIDENT

The novel is in first person narrative and Samar the eighteen year old Brahmin boy represents Indian tradition influenced to some extent by Macaulay's education system in the modern India. He is an oratious reader with an unquenchable thirst and that is why after his graduation from the Allahabad University, he stays temporarily in Banaras to read more and more books although his father has sent him to appear for the civil service examination. Miss West introduces him to Catherine as a boy who "wants to read everything" (11) and again as "the tireless autodidact" (17). Later Catherine also introduces Samar to her friends as an "intellectual" (89). In fact Samar is said to have been reading *Torrents of Spring* by Turgenev, *The World as Will and Idea* by Schopenhauer, *To the Finland Station* by Edmund Wilson and *Sentimental Education* by Gustave Flaubert at different stages in the novel. The

novel tells about Samar's encounters with some westerners who mainly come to India seeking alternatives or enticed by reading *Siddhartha* of Herman Hesse and the consequences thereafter.

Samar's relationship with Catherine a young French lady, who lives with Anand an Indian sitarist, forms the main plot of the novel. Although Miss West tells Samar that Anand and Catherine are very much in love, Samar does not see that in their glance. He feels that they are "so dissimilar" (18) as if Catherine is "from another world, richer and more fulfilled than the one she lived in now" (19). It is this feeling that helps him to ward off his scruples in his desire to meet Catherine often. The relationship of Catherine the French girl and Anand the Indian youth has much significance. Catherine truly represents a developed country like France who at times shows some humanitarian concern and sympathy for the poor and unattended people as an obligation.

Anand represents the dreamy, miserable, poor, jobless, aimless, lazy youth of India who look up to the West for opulence in life. He is a dreamer because he thinks that his music can bring him fame and money in the West. Catherine gets an apprehension regarding the realization of his dreams. When she becomes slightly distressed with Anand she seeks the opinion of Samar and he advises "detachment" as he thinks that as the best quality one should attain in life. "Detachment" is the remedy given in the Indian tradition for the malady of undue affection. Samar's physical union with Catherine in the remote fold of the Himalayas is more a wilful mischief of the experienced lady on the novice chaste boy. Samar, the Brahmin boy's first romantic inclination and the irretrievable act of

physical love is central to the novel and his equipoise is also irretrievably disturbed. The experience totally changes Samar and Catherine becomes an obsession for him. As for Catherine, it is one more moment of mischief to add her experience. But due to her humanitarian concerns, she takes special care not to give pain to Anand by letting him know of her relationship with Samar.

The logic of the West is pragmatic and when Anand comes to know of the whole affair, Catherine accuses Samar of encouraging Catherine's emotional perversions which were violence against Anand. It becomes a fatal blow to Samar when she asks him to totally break away from her, showing utmost dignity and grace. In Catherine's case, "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, only to find that she had made a mistake" (133). But, Samar feels a terrible void in his life and he "travelled everywhere and nowhere" (215) before settling at Dharamshala.

Samar is having logic of the philosophical sort and he seeks a philosophical solution for his problem. Samar is bewitched by the external appearance and manners of Catherine and he thinks that the relationship between Anand and Catherine is incompatible. If she lives with the Indian youth, Anand, she could also live with him as her surrogate Indian partner. That justification melts away his initial scruples and he develops a passion to be with Catherine despite its inappropriateness. But it is notable that he does not contrive situations and so he could not be blamed as Catherine does. His wanderings along the remnants of Babri Masjid, becomes symbolic of his own mental state. The sights described remind one that real Ramjanmabhumi is in the minds of true devotees and search for a geographical locale is futile. He realizes that the rampages matched his own state of mind, a situation where microcosm matches or goes exactly in the pattern of the macrocosm. The Babri Masjid, the historical monument of Babar was demolished perhaps out of a fascist love for unsullied ethnicity to the exclusion of everything exotic. In the mind of Samar, the icon of love to the beautiful form of Catherine is demolished out of her love for her wilful nature. Violence is the outcome in both cases; microcosmic violence and macrocosmic violence. It was definitely not his world. He would like to be out of it and he knows that equanimity cannot be brought out simply by leaving the macrocosmic violence. While Samar tries to attain equanimity through the spiritual philosophy of India, Catherine tries to rationalize the experience and puts the blame on Samar, also by her logic. The Occident relies upon pragmatic logic and the Orient takes refuge in philosophy.

Catherine's love originates from the yearning of the strong to protect the weak. It almost parallels the charity acts of the developed countries towards the

developing countries. Her acts of physical intimacy with Samar are also gestures of generosity. She cuts off her intimacy with Samar fearing that any knowledge of it would hurt the feelings of Anand. Finally when Anand comes to know of it, the inevitable separation takes place and she conveniently puts the blame on Samar. Anand then leads a miserable lonely life completely engulfed in the past memories. Samar also breaks down when Catherine accuses him as solely responsible for her physical intimacy she had with him and the final break up with Anand. Here Catherine analyses her life with logic but with logic that suits her. She falls in love to Anand impulsively without thinking of his credibility and eligibility. She also makes love to Samar impulsively and later regrets it when it hurts Anand. Still later, she goes on changing her boy-friends.

In fact the other westerners in the novel like Mark or Sarah are also not genuine or one-pointed either in their probe in the East or in their pursuit of socialism. They also miss the real thing and wander after the superimposed fantasies which they consider as the real things. They also use logic to suit their interest. Samar could not go for any such justification and he just wanders like a hermit from place to place in search of mental peace. At last he takes asylum in the Indian philosophy which recommends acquisition of equanimity of mind. In fact he himself once advises Catherine to keep detachment. But after his relationship with Catherine, it was he who failed to keep detachment.

The later part of the novel shows his attempt to regain his balance of mind and the last sentence of the novel implies that he has almost achieved what he sought at his own limited perception and level. Thus the logic of the East and that of the West seem to be quite different. The logic of the West is down-to-earth and sensible while the logic of the East is difficult to prove. Though the story takes place mainly in India and the protagonist lives entirely in India, the novel gives a clear cut encounter of the East and the West. But the encounter of the East and the West is not depicted in spiteful terms even when Catherine's parents, friends, the embassy man or Anand's parents disapprove the association of the East and the West.

By settling at Dharamshala an "unambitious little town" (218), Samar tries to cut the "I", the ego factor to make it a cross of sacrifice. Samar thinks that the "eventless life wasn't very far from matching the old Brahmin idea of retreat" (239). But when he finds Mark whom he knew in Benares a second time, he frantically avoids him and thus realizes that the equanimity he thinks he has achieved is not that stable. Samar admits: "I now wonder at my extreme reaction. But Mark's insecurity and self-aggrandizement wasn't what I, after years of my own private struggles, wanted to

be involved with when my own equanimity, the balance I had arrived at in Dharamshala, was so fragile" (239). In fact equanimity is not to be achieved in total seclusion; it is to be achieved only by taming passions.

The novel also offers a comparative narrative of the past and the present of the national tradition. Even a gap of seven years makes considerable changes in Banares and what Samar observes when he visits the city is mainly the changes due to globalization with the backup of Information Technology. The "anorexic MTV VJs with their bare midriffs and eyebrow rings and rapid-fire-banter" (258) make him restless. Even the piece of information he gathers from Miss West does not evoke much feelings in his mind. Miss West reveals that Catherine got rid of Anand. In Paris they could not find any profitable assignment for Anand. After the separation, Catherine keeps on changing her boyfriends. Anand is living in a dreadful slum in Delhi, trapped in the golden past. Before parting ways, Miss West invites Samar to England where she is to settle down soon. Samar reaches back to his hotel where everything is in a pandemonium due to the heavy rain and the leaking roofs. Samar is completely drenched in water and the novel comes to a close with the statement: "But I was feeling quite calm" (277).

On a closer look, it could be seen that the tradition in India has its own logic based on the age long tradition of four "ashramas" in an individual's life. The more one is rooted in the tradition the more the logic works. In the Indian tradition, spiritual attainment is perceived as the ultimate goal of human life. So, different roles and duties are prescribed for an individual, in order to achieve the goal. Material comforts and sensual pleasures are considered as secondary and hence the plight of Samar's parents. In the logic of the Indian tradition unbridled emotions and matters of the heart i.e., impulses are to be controlled and pruned with reason as they are dangerous in the path of spirituality. But these concepts are not empirically tested or proved and as such seem to be illogical and as visionary to a modern educated mind. Samar's mother who is not educated in the modern ways is more rooted in the tradition and hence her silent bearings and the secluded life in an ashram towards the end of her life. Samar's father has modern education and hence, although he prefers a life of seclusion, he cares for his emotional fulfillments.

The novel is in three parts. The first part shows Samar as a voracious reader, a chaste youth who is just out of his teens. The second part shows Samar enticed and shattered by Catherine. In the third part Samar tries to achieve a stoic stature. The narration has a dreamy quality which effects a spell on the readers. Benares 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 Benares are vividly described:

The river gleamed and glistened 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.

Choudhary in his "New Generation Indian English Novel" in *Indian English Novel in the Nineties* tells: "*The Romantics* is not a novel about east-west encounter but about the frustration of the new-age global youth who get lost in the labyrinths of life owing to their romantic illusions" (21). Of course the novel is very much about frustrations. Many end up with frustrations as the couplets of Faiz which Rajesh quotes in a letter to Samar, convey: " 'This is not that long-looked-for break of day/Not that clear dawn in quest of which those comrades/set out...' " (247). But the novel delineates an encounter as Akash Kapur reviews the novel as, "a subtle and often contradictory story of cross-cultural encounter" (1). The frustrations of the Western characters and Samar the Indian character are marked by the difference in their logic. The difference in the Oriental logic and the Occidental logic itself makes the real encounter in the novel.

PROJECTED DICHOTOMIES

The novel provides a space where indigenous characters mingle with immigrant characters so as to open up the possibilities of juxtaposing the occident and the orient. The Common divides apparently seen in the novel are in matters of Economy and Concepts of Modernity, Gender Issues, Social and Private Life, Romance and Sex and Religious Practices and Spirituality. These five areas as shown in the novel are to be studied to examine the exact nature of dichotomies.

Economic factors make a big gulf between the West and the East as invariably projected by the novel under study. In *The Romantics: A novel*,

when Catherine's parents insist that Anand should make enough money in India to get his air ticket to France, Catherine wonders if they do not "know difference in scale between the two economies?" (54). Mark says "You know one of the great things for me about coming to India has been knowing about poverty and pain and suffering, and realizing that there is a whole world outside America where people don't even have the basic thing in life" (15). He also adds that seeing poverty on television doesn't register much and when one gets the direct experience that would benefit a lot. Catherine's friends also have similar notions. "Most of them couldn't think of India as anything other than an exotic hotbed of illiteracy, poverty and religion..." (91). They would speak excitedly of sadhus, beggars and huge rats scurrying about in the alleys.

Many of the western characters in the novel think that Indians exploit the westerners for making material benefits and often they mouth their opinion without any hesitation. A good example of this in the novel is when the director of the French Information Centre at the French embassy in New Delhi talks to Catherine's mother in Anand's presence. Curiously the French director speaks to the French lady in English and tells that Catherine should steer clear of "devious Indian men". "The director knew of many instances where French women had fallen for them, only to find themselves used as passports to Europe..." (47). In India poverty is so prevalent and in Anand's case he definitely is badly in need of money. Anand's parents have two daughters to give in marriage, but they are helpless because of the dearth of money to give as dowry.

Another Indian boy from an Indian village, Rajesh also has a background of abject poverty. Rajesh's childhood was spent in maze fields and carpet factories where unscrupulous child labour prevailed. In fact almost all the people in the remote village share this fate. Their homes are identical buildings in a row, "one room, the walls showing through" (168). They are Brahmins and his mother complains that they have reached a dead end because of the reservation policy in India (170). "All the government jobs these days were going to low-caste people, and not only did Rajesh have the wrong kind of caste, he had no connection anywhere" (170). The novel evidently projects a deplorable condition of the present day India in the background of corruption and caste politics.

In fact most of the sights in India described in the novel are of poverty and peril:

... broken roads and slime-covered drains and defecating men passed our weary eyes. At the railway station truculent coolies bargained with passengers driven to near-hysteria by the simple act of offloading family and luggage. Ragged urchins screeched 'Chai, chai' while cracked loudspeakers above droned out details of delayed arrivals and departures. Outside, rickshaw drivers with thin,

unshaven, mustachioed faces and blood-red eyes jostled, harangued and taunted arriving visitors. (144)

Another excerpt: "The streets were littered with tiny soaked slips of paper and rotting vegetables and cow dung, the profound silence cleft only by the slow grind of rickshaw wheels. The houses on both sides looked wretched and dark. Here and there on rickshaw seats lay slumbering bodies in cramped postures" (145). The sights are not different in the villages and small towns anywhere in India. Near Pondicherry, Samar finds "the overpopulated slums with their tottering houses, fetid alleys and exposed gutters, their cooped-up frustrations and festering violence, their hardened ugliness" (215-216). "Rubbish lay in uneven mounds, or was strewn across the cobblestone floor, firmly sticking to the place where it had been deposited by an overflowing open drain. After every twenty metres or so, a fresh stench hung in the air" (20-21). There is also a reference in the novel about the perils and pains of exile which the Tibetan people at Dharmasala experience: "They looked remote and abstracted even while talking to you, and you wondered what memories of lost homelands were decaying behind the piercing sadness of their stoic faces" (219).

There are also dismal pictures of the universities in India which are supposed to be the centers of learning which guide the young generations in India. A seven page description of the student politics, agitation and riots in Banares Hindu University is given in the novel (78-84). The students in a fury throw hand grenades at the police and one is fatally wounded. Similarly the situation of the reputed Allahabad University is also given in the novel:

Set up in 1887, the university was once known as the Oxford of the East. To seekers of jobs and careers in the colonial dispensation it offered an attractive pedigree. But unbeknown to those of us who still set store by its old reputation, the university had suffered a steep decline in the years since independence. Anarchy reigned behind the still impressive façade of its domes and towers. Academic sessions were in total disarray: examinations due in April were more likely to be held in December, if at all. Everyone was locked in conflict: students against students, teachers against teachers, teachers against students, students against the management, teachers against the management, students against the police. Often these conflicts turned violent. Students shot at each other on the streets with country-made revolvers. Late at night, you were hurtled out of your sleep by the sound of a crude bomb going off somewhere in the vicinity. In the morning, you read the details in the crime pages of the local Hindi papers: political rivalry, ambush, instant death, investigation ordered, no arrests so far. (8-9)

Some of the university students are shown as elderly men who promote politics and hooliganism in the campus. Vijay a secretary of the student union leaves the university almost middle aged after getting six degrees in Literature, Commerce, Journalism and Law (21-22). Rajesh who becomes Samar's friend and patron at the university also is a politician turned criminal. Vijay later becomes a "contractor" – the much used multipurpose word that could denote anything from a supplier of building materials to an organizer of arson and even murder. Almost all of the student politicians and troublemakers called themselves 'contractors'; the word was considered more weighty than 'businessman' (22).

When job opportunities were few, the only enticing factor for the students as well as parents was the civil service examination:

Almost every student took the year-long three-tier exams at some stage; it was the thing to do whether or not anything in your academic record justified your ambitions. Though very exacting, they still offered the quickest route to affluence and power in North India. More important, they offered a way out of the hopelessness and desperation many of the students from nearby villages and towns knew awaited them at home. These students spent the best part of their twenties in their badly lit rooms, grappling with various exam 'guides,' memorizing whole essays on Gandhi and Nehru, cramming their heads with arcane statistics about the Indian economy. But only a handful of them ever qualified. To the rest, the results came every year as a fresh blow. They were the ones you saw age fast, with grey hair, crow's feet and faltering eyesight; and every year there were at least four or five suicides. (29)

Further the novel also refers to new yardsticks of modernity appearing in India. "Those ghastly fast-food places and beauty parlours and so-called Italian restaurants and the hotels with discotheques – the money for all this comes from the mafia" (267). The novel also shows the tendency of succumbing to luxurious ways, especially when one comes from a financially poor background and then picks up modern education. In his trip from Dharamasala to Pondicherry, Samar takes a taxi to Pathankot. "The taxi was a luxury, and it was with the same light-headed extravagance that I cancelled my earlier reservations and upgraded my ticket to second-class air-conditioned" (253). It is out of the same sense of "modernity" that Samar's father reprimanded Samar for his decision to work as a lower primary school teacher (227).

Catherine blames Mitterrand and socialism for the failing economy (111) and unemployment in France. It can be seen that Catherine's French friends who visit her in India are fascinated by socialistic ideals. But after their university life the fascination remained a mere fascination which never called for any action or social activities. Even the romantic affliction

between Anand and Catherine (49) is in a way an interaction and encounter between the present day India and France. Both of them reflect the difference of the countries from which they come: "Anand, fidgety and intense, who, with his thin face and tormented looks, would always be associated with the warren of dark slumbering alleys around us; and Catherine, looking in her calm self-possession, as she would always do, from another world, richer and more fulfilled than the one she lived in now" (18).

When gender issues in the novel are studied, discrimination towards the female gender can be seen prominently in the Indian scenario, whereas the West is not devoid of such notions. In Samar's own family, in *The Romantics*, it is his father who takes all the major decisions regarding the family, but at the same time his mother also has the freedom to take crucial decisions regarding her own life and she opts for a life in an ashram towards the fag end of her life. In the case of the Pandey's, although Mr and Mrs Pandey lead separate lives where they don't interact with each other, both have their own circles of freedom and Mrs Pandey runs the family chore with a family retainer. But generally roles are divided for the male and the female in the Indian society. Ladies are to run the family chores while men are supposed to earn the livelihood.

Anand makes a remark to Miss West that Catherine "must learn to cook" (12). The immediate reaction of Miss West is "you sexist Indian men, you never change, do you?" (12). This shows the behaviour of the average Indian men who do not normally share the responsibility of the day-to-day family chores out of a notion that such duties are entirely the responsibility of the ladies. At the same time Anand is fully aware of his complete financial dependence upon Catherine. "It wasn't something he could refer to without embarrassment" (46). It naturally makes him diffident and miserable as the role of the provider and impregnator is always assigned to a male as Lewis MacLeod observes: "...masculinity has a sexual, a custodial, and a material dimension; and capable of defending his various territories" (157). This homogenous global gender image is the "export of the European/American gender order to the colonized world" (Nurse 4). Anand lacks standard in some of the parameters and hence Catherine's father "could never approve of her [Catherine's] relationship with a poor Indian" (59). Anand's parents had two daughters to marry, but there was no money for the dowry. This reference in the novel also projects gender discrimination and the the prevailing dowry system in India (52).

When Miss. West refers to Catherine as a very pretty girl, Samar is a little bit embarrassed as such expressions are not commonly used in the society which he knows: "'Pretty': it wasn't a word much used for women in the world I had known, where

even the most beautiful women were kept unaware of their advantage. Women were obedient daughters, dutiful wives and devoted mothers; they weren't even considered outside these roles" (16). But gender discrimination is not something which doesn't prevail in the west, as the novel suggests. Miss West tells Samar "You know I never went to a university. My father belonged to a generation, where people didn't bother with educating their daughters" (9).

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 *The Romantics*, gives the description of a sight from the bathing ghats of Benares: "...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" (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).

However Indians generally have a sort of admiration for the Europeans and it may be part of the Indian snobbery as shown in the novel. 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.

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, Nau Ratri: 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).

A great difference, as portrayed in the novel, 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 boyfriends (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 boyfriend" 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.

Religious Practices and Spirituality is the realm where major differences can be pointed out between the Orient and the Occident. 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)

Westerners in the novel are shown as more materialistic and so many of them fail to understand the significance of Oriental spiritual philosophy. Samar tells that his father used to read out stories from Mahabharat, explaining the "illusoriness of love and attachment" (71). Samar's father's desire to retreat to Pondicherry ashram after Samar's mother's demise was also an attempt to develop detachment (8). Many Indians consciously or unconsciously give utmost importance to religious practices more than anything else. Samar's mother always carried small idols of Krishna and Rama along with her rosary beads and religious books:

These things had accompanied her all her life; they had made up her world; but 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, a world with its own rhythms and seasons, virtues and habits. Nagh, Aasharh, Phagun, Sankrant, Amavasya, Nau Ratri: 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's mother chooses to live in an ashram in Benares when she realizes that she does not have much longer to live and the decision is in tune with the Indian tradition (68-69). Fascination of an Indian for the Himalayas is also shown in the novel. Samar always likes the grandeur and serenity of the Himalayas (129). When he later settles in Dharamasala, he finds it an isolated place ideal for the nourishment of his detachment. Placid life at Dahramasala was not very far from the life of a retreat (239).

Catherine fails to understand the significance of detachment or renunciation. Commenting on the life of renunciation of a young priest at Kalpi, Catherine tells that she finds it as "empty, hollow. There is no love in it. It's a life without love. What's interesting about it? Nothing" (131) Catherine says, whereas Samar finds it as "an interesting life" (131). After giving Samar his first experience in sex, Catherine with a giggle tells "But I am happy.... That you are not following your father's footsteps any more, that you are not a

celibate Babaji any more” (143). Mark also shares this difference in attitude:

There is another thing I realize. It's that we are made of flesh and bone and the flesh is the most important thing we have. You know, you realize after some time what a load of bull shit ... all these great religions and philosophies are, this thing about solitude and loneliness being good for your spiritual and artistic growth. So you end up starving yourself in every way, waiting and hoping for this truly awesome spiritual jackpot that never comes, and then one day you are down there all alone on Manikarnika Ghat turning to ashes with not a single soul on the fucking planet who feel sorry for you. (237)

The difference of attitude between the West and the East is clear here and Samar says, “Mark's words even still rung in my head, as I couldn't but feel their alienness. I hadn't heard anyone speak like that for years now; the vocabulary, the concerns, the themes and the passion all came from another world” (238). Some westerners do like a radical assault on received knowledge (12) and they like to experiment with alternate ideology. Sarah the German lady is a “practicing Buddhist” (12). But many of these westerners do not fully comprehend the Oriental philosophy and soon would end up totally frustrated. So many Indians look askance at western seekers.

CONCLUSION

In the novel, *The Romantics: A Novel*, the encounter between the East and West is not depicted in spiteful terms. A thorough study of the five areas where common divides are apparently seen in the novel such as matters of Economy and Concepts of Modernity, Gender Issues, Social and Private Life, Romance and Sex and Religious Practices and Spirituality shows the exact nature of the dichotomies. As far as Economy and concepts of Modernity are concerned, the novel gives lengthy descriptions of poverty in India with special emphasis on the poor condition of the roads, menacing auto rickshaw drivers, unhygienic and dirty streets with exposed gutters and stench, slums without proper drainage facilities, beggars and rats.

Child labour, problems of the Tibetan refugees, Student politics, conflicts and anarchy in the Indian Universities and threat of the mafia in different centres are special problems prominently raised in the novel. Mushrooming fast food centres, beauty parlours and restaurants with discotheques are shown as the ill-disposed effects of modernity. The West is not shown as an ideal place devoid of economic problems. There is reference in the novel to the failing economy and unemployment in France and Catherine accuses Mitterrand and socialism as the root cause of the problems. However most of the youngsters including the protagonist have association with books and ideas of Marxism and

socialism, although few work seriously for the materialization of the ideals.

When it comes to Gender issues, the novel shows discrimination towards women as a prominent feature in India and explains the traditionally divided roles of the males and the females in the Indian society. The set roles are such tight compartments so that one even feels difficulty in considering another man's wife as “pretty”. The dowry system which prevails in the society is shown as a grave evil which denies natural justice to the subjugated gender. The West is also shown as having gender discrimination as it is evident from the reference that Miss. West's father did not bother with educating his daughter. With regard to Social and Sexual life, the novel shows westerners more or less as practical people while Indians are shown as colourful and emotional. At the same time Indians are depicted as dreamy and orthodox people who cling to a different philosophy. Parties and co-habitation are alien concepts to many Indians.

Further the novel 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. 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. They find even love and sex as means of a sort of escapism.

In the matter of Spirituality, the novel shows Westerners as pro-materialistic who could not comprehend the Oriental spiritual philosophy. A life of renunciation is empty and hollow for many of the Europeans. Most of the Indians are shown as having spiritual yearning which they take as more important than material achievements. Many of them observe rigorous religious practices such as fasting, chanting divine names and mantras and doing meditation. Emotions are to be controlled and kept docile in such a way of life. In fact these differences in the philosophical and pragmatic logic of the people are what makes the encounter of the Orient and the Occident really problematic.

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