

NEGOTIATING THE POSTCOLONIAL SELF: IDENTITY, NATIONALISM, AND CULTURAL HYBRIDITY IN PANKAJ MISHRA'S THE ROMANTICS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the construction and negotiation of postcolonial identity and nationalism in Pankaj Mishra's debut novel *The Romantics* (2000), situating the text within the broader trajectory of Indian Writing in English (IWE) and postcolonial theoretical discourse. The study argues that Mishra's protagonist, Samar, embodies the fragmented, hybrid identity that characterizes postcolonial subjectivity in India, shaped simultaneously by the legacies of British colonialism, the aspirations of post-independence nationalism, and the pressures of an increasingly globalized world. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Homi K. Bhabha, Benedict Anderson, Frantz Fanon, and Edward Said, the paper analyzes how Samar's journey through Varanasi dramatizes the tensions between tradition and modernity, self and other, indigenous cultural roots and Western intellectual influence. The paper further explores how Mishra portrays nationalism not as a stable or redemptive ideology but as a contested, paradoxical force that both unifies and divides individuals within the postcolonial nation. The East-West dichotomy central to the novel is examined through the lens of orientalism, cultural hybridity, and the concept of the contact zone, demonstrating how foreign travelers' romanticized perceptions of India contrast with the internally fractured reality experienced by Samar. Ultimately, the paper contends that *The Romantics* offers a nuanced and disenchanted commentary on postcolonial identity formation, presenting selfhood not as something to be

discovered but as something perpetually constructed through historical, cultural, and intellectual negotiation. The novel's continued relevance to contemporary debates on globalization, nationalism, and belonging is also considered.

Keywords: *Postcolonial identity, nationalism, cultural hybridity, Indian Writing in English, Pankaj Mishra, orientalism, East-West dichotomy*

INTRODUCTION

Indian Writing in English (IWE) has evolved from its colonial origins into a globally recognized literary tradition, shaped by the introduction of English through Lord Macaulay's Minute on Education (1835) and by subsequent generations of writers who transformed the colonial language into a vehicle for indigenous expression. Pioneering novelists such as Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, and R.K. Narayan established the foundational concerns of Indian English fiction: the tension between colonial subjugation and national self-determination, the challenge of conveying an Indian spirit through a non-native tongue, and the depiction of social realities ranging from caste oppression to the textures of provincial life. The postcolonial period deepened these concerns, with writers such as Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Amitav Ghosh engaging with history, memory, and transnational identity in ways that earned international recognition and reshaped global literary discourse. Pankaj Mishra, born in Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh, in 1969, emerged within this tradition as a distinctive voice, combining literary sensibility with incisive political and philosophical commentary. His debut novel, *The Romantics* (2000), is a semi-autobiographical narrative set in Varanasi, in which the protagonist Samar navigates the complexities of postcolonial identity amid encounters with Western expatriates, Indian intellectuals, and competing philosophical traditions. The novel's central research question

concerns how Mishra engages with nationalism and identity, and what political undertones animate the narrative. This paper addresses those questions by analyzing Samar's journey through the lens of postcolonial theory, the East-West dichotomy, and the novel's engagement with literature and philosophy as instruments of self-formation.

FINDINGS

The principal finding of this study is that Mishra constructs postcolonial identity in *The Romantics* as inherently fragmented and perpetually unresolved. Samar's journey in Varanasi dramatizes the split consciousness described by Fanon, as his formation through English literary education distances him from his cultural roots even as he remains disconnected from the Western world he has been trained to admire. Colonial history, as Partha Chatterjee argues, did not simply vanish at independence but persisted in the institutions, languages, and social hierarchies of postcolonial India, and Samar's internal struggle mirrors this national dilemma. His inability to forge stable relationships or commit to a coherent ideological position reflects what Ashis Nandy describes as the psychological wounds of colonization, which manifest in the anxieties of modern life rather than resolving into clear self-knowledge.

Nationalism in *The Romantics* is portrayed not as a unifying force but as a paradoxical ideology that simultaneously offers purpose and imposes constraint. The novel does not present a monolithic vision of national identity but instead interrogates the ways in which that identity is shaped by colonial legacies and contemporary cultural pressures. Samar's encounters with Western expatriates and Indian intellectuals reveal the multiple and competing claims that nationalism makes on individuals, echoing Partha Chatterjee's observation that postcolonial

nationalism often mimics the very structures of power it once sought to overthrow. The novel's depiction of India as a site where orientalist fantasies coexist with internally fractured realities demonstrates that the postcolonial nation remains a contested imaginative construct rather than a stable collective identity. The East-West dichotomy is central to the novel's structure and functions through the mechanism of cultural hybridity as theorized by Bhabha. Samar's engagement with Western writers such as T. S. Eliot, Albert Camus, and Fyodor Dostoevsky shapes his existential outlook but deepens his alienation from his Indian heritage, producing a condition of in-betweenness that is neither fully Eastern nor fully Western. The Western travelers in the novel, particularly Catherine, reproduce the orientalist gaze by seeking spiritual self-discovery in India while remaining tethered to their own cultural frameworks, as Said's analysis would predict. Their superficial engagement with Indian culture, contrasted with Samar's more internalized conflict, illustrates the persistence of uneven power dynamics in cross-cultural encounter.

The novel further demonstrates that globalization, while producing new cultural flows and hybrid identities, does not resolve the contradictions of postcolonial existence but intensifies them. Mishra presents modernity as a fractured and contested space where identity is constantly negotiated, a position that aligns with Chakrabarty's critique of the universalization of Western modernity. Samar's disillusionment with both Eastern and Western philosophical traditions by the novel's conclusion reinforces the text's central argument that identity in the postcolonial world is not a destination to be reached but an ongoing process of construction shaped by historical, political, and cultural forces.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that Pankaj Mishra's *The Romantics* offers a sustained and nuanced engagement with the postcolonial condition, dramatizing through Samar's journey the fragmentation, hybridity, and irresolution that characterize identity formation in post-independence India. The novel challenges simplistic notions of national identity by presenting nationalism as a paradoxical force and personal selfhood as perpetually deferred rather than achievable. By situating the text within the theoretical frameworks of Anderson, Bhabha, Said, Fanon, and Chatterjee, this paper has demonstrated that *The Romantics* is not merely a personal narrative but a commentary on the broader political and cultural dynamics of postcolonial India. The East-West dichotomy, the legacy of colonial education, and the pressures of globalization all converge in the novel to produce a protagonist whose search for belonging remains unresolved, reflecting the condition of postcolonial societies that continue to negotiate between their indigenous heritage and the enduring influence of colonial modernity. *The Romantics* remains a significant text in postcolonial literary studies precisely because it refuses comfortable resolution, insisting instead on the complexity and ongoing nature of identity formation in a rapidly changing world.

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