CHAPTER VI

DIASPORA IN
ANURAG MATHUR’S MAKING THE MINISTER SMILE, PANKAJ MISHRA’S THE ROMANTICS AND AMIT CHOUDHURI’S A NEW WORLD

The Literature of the Indian Diaspora constitutes a major study of the literature and other cultural texts of the Indian diaspora. It is also an important contribution to diaspora theory in general. Examining both the ‘old’ Indian diaspora of early capitalism, following the abolition of slavery, and the ‘new’ diaspora linked to movements of late capital, Mishra argues that a full understanding of the Indian diaspora can only be achieved if attention is paid to the particular locations of both the ‘old’ and the ‘new in nation states. Applying a theoretical framework based on trauma, mourning or impossible mourning, specters, identity, travel, translation, and recognition, Mishra uses the term ‘imaginary’ to refer to any ethnic enclave in a nation-state that defines itself, consciously or unconsciously, as a group in displacement. He examines the works of key writers, many now based across the globe in Canada, Australia, America and the UK, - V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, M.G. Vassanji, Anurag Mathur, Shani Mootoo, Pankaj Mishra, Bharati Mukherjee, Amit Choudhuri, David Dabydeen, Rohinton Mistry and Hanif Kureishi, among them - to show how they
exemplify both the diasporic imaginary and the respective traumas of the ‘old’ and ‘new’ Indian diasporas.

Diaspora Literature involves an idea of a homeland, a place from where the displacement occurs and narratives of harsh journeys undertaken on account of economic compulsions. Basically Diaspora is a minority community living in exile. The Oxford English Dictionary 1989 Edition (second) traces the etymology of the word ‘Diaspora’ back to its Greek root and to its appearance in the Old Testament (Deut: 28:25) as its references. God’s intentions for the people of Israel are to be dispersed across the world. The Oxford English Dictionary here commences with the Judic History, mentioning only two types of dispersal: The Jews living dispersed among the gentiles after the captivity and the Jewish Christians residing outside the Palestine. The dispersal - initially - signifies the location of a fluid human autonomous space involving a complex set of negotiation and exchange between the nostalgia and desire for the Homeland and the making of a new home, adapting to the power, relationships between the minority and majority, being spokes persons for minority rights and their people back home and significantly transacting the Contact Zone - a space changed with the possibility of multiple challenges. Diaspora also refers to anybody of people living outside their traditional homeland. In the tradition of Indo-Christian, the fall of Satan from the heaven and humankind's separation from the Garden of Eden, metaphorically the
separation from God constitute diasporic situations. Etymologically, ‘Diaspora’ with its connotative political weight is drawn from Greek meaning to disperse and signifies a voluntary or forcible movement of the people from the homeland into new regions.

Under colonialism, 'Diaspora' is a multifarious movement which involves the temporary or permanent movement of Europeans all over the world, leading to colonial settlement. Consequently the ensuing economic exploitation of the settled areas necessitated large amount of labor that could not be fulfilled by local populace. William Sarfan points out that the term Diaspora can be applied to expatriate minority communities whose members share some of the common characteristics given hereunder.

1. They or their ancestor have been dispersed from a special original centre or two or more peripheral of foreign regions.

2. They retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland-its physical location, history and achievements.

3. They believe they are not and perhaps cannot be fully accepted by their lost society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulted from it.

4. They regard their ancestral homeland as theirs, true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendents would eventually return when conditions are appropriate.
5. They believe they should collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their homeland and its safety and prosperity.

6. They continue to relate, personally and vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship.

Though in the age of technological advancement which has made the traveling easier and the distance shorter so the term Diaspora has lost its original connotation, yet simultaneously it has also emerged in another form healthier than the former. At first, it is concerned with human beings attached to the homelands. Their sense of yearning for the homeland, a curious attachment to its traditions, religions and languages give birth to diasporic literature which is primarily concerned with the individual’s or community's attachment to the homeland. The migrants arrives unstuck from more than land, they run from pillar to post crossing the boundaries of time, memory and history carrying with them the vision and dreams of returning homeland as and when like and find fit to return. Although, it is an axiomatic truth that their dreams are futile and it wouldn't be possible to return to the homeland is metaphorical. According to Naipaul the Indians are well aware that their journey to Trinidad had been final but these tensions and throes remain a recurring theme in the Diasporic Literature.

Indian Diaspora can be classified into two kinds:
1. Forced Migration to Africa, Fiji or the Caribbean on account of slavery or indentured labour in the 18th or 19th century.

2. Voluntary Migration to U.S.A., U.K., Germany, France or other European countries for the sake of professional or academic purposes.

According to Amitava Ghosh - the Indian Diaspora is one of the most important demographic dislocations of Modern Times and each day is growing and assuming the form of representative of a significant force in global culture. According to Paranjape, there are two distinct phases of Diaspora; these are called the Visitor Diaspora and Settler Diaspora much similar to Maxwells ‘Invader’ and ‘Settler’ Colonialist.

The first Diaspora consisted of disprivileged and subaltern classes forced alienation was a one way ticket to a distant diasporic settlement. As, in the days of yore, the return to Homeland was next to impossible due to lack of proper means of transportation, economic deficiency, and vast distances so the physical distance became a psychological alienation, and the homeland became the sacred icon in the diasporic imagination of the authors also. But the second Diaspora was the result of man’s choice and inclination towards the material gains, professional and business interests. It is particularly the representation of privilege and access to contemporary advanced technology and communication. Here, no dearth of money
or means is visible rather economic and life style advantages are facilitated by the multiple visas and frequent flyer utilities.

Here the critique of Paranjape generates the debate of competing forms of writing: Diaspora or domiciled - those who stayed back home and importantly a competitive space for the right to construct the homeland, so he points out the possibility of harm by usurping the space which native self-representations are striving to find in the International Literary Market place and that they may contribute to the Colonization of the Indian psyche by pondering to Western tastes which prefer to see India in a negative light. The works of various authors like Amitava Ghosh, Tabish, Khair, Anurag Mathur, Agha Shahid Ali, Pankaj Mishra, Sonali Bose, Salman Rushdie and Amit Choudhuri confirm a hybridity between diasporic and domiciled consciousness. They are national, not nationalistic inclusive, not parochial, respecting the local while being ecumenical, celebrating human values and Indian pluralism as a vital worldliness.

The diasporian authors engage in cultural transmission that is equitably exchanged in the manner of translating a map of reality for multiple readerships. Besides, they are equipped with bundles of memories and articulate an amalgam of global and national strands that embody real and imagined experience. It is also true that diasporic writing is full of feelings of alienation, loving for homeland
dispersed and dejection, a double identification with original homeland and adopted country, crisis of identity, and the protest against discrimination in the adopted country.

Diasporic writings are to some extent about the business of finding new angles to enter reality; the distance, geographical and cultural enables new structures of feeling. The hybridity is subversive. It resists cultural authoritarianism and challenges official truths. One of the most relevant aspects of diasporic writing is that it forces, interrogates and challenges the authoritative voices of time. The Shadow Line of Amitav Ghosh has the impulse when the Indian States were complicit in the programmes after Indira Gandhi’s assassination. The truth is that in India there is a drill associated with civil disturbances, a curfew is declared, and paramilitary units are deployed; in extreme cases, the army monarachs to the stricken areas. No city in India is better equipped to perform this drill than New Delhi, with its high security apparatus.

The writers of Diaspora are the global paradigm shift, since the challenges of Postmodernism to overreaching narratives of power relations to silence the voices of the dispossessed; these marginal voices have gained ascendance and even found a current status of privilege. These shifts suggest that it is from those who have
suffered the sentence of history-subjugation, domination, Diaspora, displacement-that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking.

The novels of Amitav Ghosh, Anurag Mathur, Pankaj Mishra and Amit Choudhuri point towards the metaphorical distinctions between the centre and margins made narrative and little histories the well known gods and the gods of small things.

Most of the major novels of South Asia are replete with the diasporic consciousness which is nothing but the witness of the all the happenings of social realities, longings and feeling of belonging. Train To Pakistan, The Dark Dancer, Azadi, Ice Candy Man, A Bend In The Ganges, Twice Born, Midnight's Children, Sunlight on A Broken Column, Twice Dead, The Rope and Ashes and Petals all these novels abound in the same tragic tale of woe and strife from different angles. Most of the fictions of South Asian Countries are written in the background of post-colonial times and the same South Asian countries were under the colonial rules of the English. After a long battle of independence when those countries were liberated, other bolt from the blue of partition happened. This theme became whys and wherefores of the most of South Asian novels and the popularity of it will prognosticate its golden future.
ANURAG MATHUR’S MAKING THE MINISTER SMILE

Introduction:

Anurag Mathur is an Indian author. He completed his schooling from The Scindia School Gwalior. He received his bachelor’s degree from Stephen’s College Delhi, and master’s degree from University of Tulsa. He is chiefly known for his novel The Inscrutable Americans written in 1991, which described the comical adventures of a young Indian student, freshly arrived in America. Mathur has made a career in journalism and publishing, and contributes to various Indian magazines and newspapers.

Making the Minister Smile, published in 1996, at first seems like a humorous novel on an American coming to India, but it is a critique on the Indian way of life with serious reading. The novel looks at the Indian poverty, politics and its eccentricities from an outsider’s point of view. This book presents an accurate Indian political scene and the relation of business men with it, as it is now appearing to a common man in India.

Plot:

Making the Minister Smile is about the adventures of an average American among the inscrutable Indians. Here an American foot ball player Chris Stark comes to the mystic East, that is India, Delhi, to further commercial links between his plastic manufacturing company in a small town of America and the KapCo
Company of Delhi. While in India, the protagonist Chris Stark becomes enmeshed in industrial disputes, political machinations, weird intelligence webs and an unfortunate love affair besides various other oddities. The owners of Indian Delhi based company called KapCo, the well-connected Kapoors of Punjabi Bagh, bribe, bash and butter all those who can deliver ministerial favours to crush a rampaging union leader; the minister is satisfyingly vulpine, complete with hooded eyes and Nehruvian references, who only smiles when the denouement reduces part of his constituency to ashes. And then there is the devil himself, travelling under the name of Main Shankar Aiyar, who lurks behind bushes but then is revealed to be only a Pakistani agent. Chris Stark steak-and-apple-pie-soccer player, finds himself astounded by globalizing India far too big to fit into anything, confronted with the estate of unknowing on whose brink New India stands. The solution to the entire Gordian knot of problems lies in making the minister smile.

**Analysis:**

Christopher’s, Chris for short, father owned Stark Plastics a small but highly-regarded company making plastic products in America. Chris was studying in his final semester in college. He was told by his father the exciting collaboration between them and KapCo in India who wanted to diversify from steel into plastics. The project progressed smoothly, with executives from India coming to be trained
and orders being placed for the appropriate injection machines and moulds to be sent to India.

Suddenly there had been a silence. When Chris had become interested in the project and started working for his father, he received an unsatisfactory reply from KapCo about labour problems. He wanted to help his father in this regard. So, a letter had been sent to Kapoors from America and received reply with a cordial invitation to stay with them in their house, which Chris had accepted and had arrived one chilly and misty dawn at Indira Gandhi International Airport outside Delhi. Chris Stark six-feet-four, weighing a healthy 300 pounds, a former player of American football who as he himself is the first to accept that think pretty good but don't talk that great on account of playing too much football. Following the opportunities created by liberalization, his family's corporation has entered into business collaboration with an Indian company, and this has brought the sportive young man to Delhi.

It was still dark outside the aircraft when he was here after the nineteen hour flight from New York. He shuffled through the door and into a large hall that looked like every arrival area in the world. An anxious look around showed that “there were no starving millions waving pitiful stumps and begging for alms and American visas.”¹ Chris recognized that this was an unreasonable fear, but he had heard so much about the poverty that he had actually half feared some sort of heart
rending reception. Chris reached a man sitting behind a counter to survey passports. He coughed gratingly, gargled loudly and spat a thick wad of blood into a bin. Chris recoiled. He thought the man had got tuberculosis. He tried not breathe and murmured, “Jesus, fifteen minutes in India and I’m going to be infected with TB.”

He wondered how this man looked so healthy with his lungs all infected with TB. This was his first reaction when he came to India. Then he met Ajai Vir who was there to receive Chris. At this time, he noticed one of his bags was missing. Throughout his trip he was to be amazed at the strange behaviour of luggage. “All his life in America he had found that bags were just bags. They lay there, you filled them up with things and then you carried them about wherever you went. If you put them somewhere they stayed put. They were peaceful if inanimate companions. But in India, they miraculously came to life, taking on the magic, mystery and personality of frisky elves.”

In later months he was to observe even more perplexing behaviour. A bag that was at his side seconds ago would suddenly be glimpsed on the head of a coolie, a suitcase secure inside a hotel room cupboard would appear tied with ropes to the roof of a taxi parked outside.

Chris was a guest from distant America. It was Sunder’s duty to look after him. He tries much to get the attention of Chris. During his month-old stay in Delhi in the Kapoor’s house, Chris found many events like a rotten potato or a tomato or a day’s old meat that disturbed Mr. Sunder so deeply which he expressed over the
telephone. Such events of Mr. Sunder, with his unique version of the English language annoyed Chris much. Mr. Sunder was the presiding deity of the Kapoor household. Though his designation was merely Assistant Manager in KapCo Ltd., it was his responsibility to ensure that all went well in the home inhabited by Ram Avtar Kapoor the Kap in KapCo and his son Ajai Vir.

The next month had sped by in a blur. Not only did Chris have to adjust to India, but he had to try and understand the complexities of the labour problems besetting KapCo. “It’s hard to concentrate on personnel demands when you are trying to adjust to a cow contentedly chewing the cud in the middle of an intensely crowded street.” He had found nobody else paying the slightest attention to the animal and began to feel that perhaps he was a little peculiar in noticing the sight. He was surprised at how soon he had got used to it.

Now, after a month he tried to figure out his feelings about India. Striking contrast in the behavior of Indians and Americans has made this novel something like reading. At the opening of the novel Chris grumbled that “this country just ain’t built for football players.” Overall, it fascinated him. It was as though the entire city was a vast replica of what America must have been like in the days of the Gold Rush. There were crowds everywhere. He could not believe the diversity of traffic. Push carts, buses, Mercedes Benz, horse drawn carriages, trucks emitting villainous fumes, strange three wheeled contraptions, all sorts of Indian cars
dashing into apparently impenetrable traffic. And of course people everywhere. He had expected much of this, but he had adjusted to it because of the strange feeling that everybody he met or passed on the street had made a little space for him. In America he had always felt that there was a field of ice around Americans, for all their friendliness, beyond which he could not penetrate. Here in India, Chris felt that the sunshine had perhaps melted that ice. Of course he was chased by beggars and beckoned by shopkeepers, but he felt strangely accepted. What he had not accepted was the chaotic sprawl of shops, hawkers and roadside entrepreneurs. At night he realized that the city was actually quite well laid out, but there were too many people competing for the same space. The dust and the fumes had annoyed him the most. But after seeing the commercial frenzy, he had decided that “the priorities were first to do business and later to look into the problems caused by pollution.” Of course it was easier to be dismissive about it when he was living in an area like Punjabi Bagh with houses every bit as smart as anything in America. The Kapoor house was circled by a high wall with several rooms. Chris had the bedroom at the extreme edge of the main house which comprised six bedrooms and three sitting rooms. There were various servants in the house flitted about and it was really a problem for Chris to adjust with them. When time passed, he had stopped thinking about them. But overall Chris felt at home. Ajai Vir and Kalpana were always there to help him to settle down.
Kalpana Singh was Ajai’s girlfriend and they were planning to get married as soon as the labour problem resolved. She was the daughter of a minor royal family that had fallen on hard times. Kapoor approved the match simply because her family had excellent contacts in politics. Kalpana lived by herself in a small apartment since her parents preferred to live in their own palace in the foothills of the Himalayas. She was twenty-four years old, tall, dusky, worked with a garment exporter, and Chris thought she was one of the most beautiful girls he had ever seen in his life. He was in a dilemma, because he sensed that she reciprocated his interest. When Kalpana came they went out to see Qutub Minar in her red Maruti car. They talked to each other many things regarding India and its culture. Chris asked her, “I always thought Indian girls were virgins till they got married.” She replied, “That was in another century. Today almost no one is. And one or two experiences don’t really count.” It means according Kalpana, they have their fun then get married and become good wives but not faithful. Chris was puzzled with this and had asked for his chances with Indian girls and shocked with the answer that he had more chances than Indian men because when compared, he is safe, girls would not lose their reputation and there will not be any complications later. After that visit to Qutub Minar they go to her apartment. There they love each other and then onwards the affair continues till the end. This is another plot that runs with the main to support the happenings of the novel.
Chris’ initial apprehension about the country and its people seem to come true in bits and parts. It is part funny; part boring. The language is quite simple and pace is decently fine. Once he wanted to see Taj Mahal, a month after he had been in India. Ajai permitted him and asked Sunder to fix the tickets. ‘Fix’ is the right word, thought Chris. Because, “Any place in the world, it would be ‘get’ the tickets. But in India, he’d found, the simplest things were the most complex. The act of getting a ticket to India’s most visited spot would inevitably require all sorts of incredible manoeuvring.”

Next day he reached Agra and a taxi took him through a dusty, crowded, ancient town that could not have changed much from the Mughal days. He spent the whole day prowling around Taj, memorizing its lattice work, its ornamentation and its sheer beauty. He was humbled as never before in his life. “It’s a bit of cold sperm solidified into marble and frozen for all time, a reminder of the Emperor Shah Jahan as much as of his wife, Mumtaz Mahal.”

The day after Sharmaji visited Ram Avtar’s home, Kalpana again took Chris to see another monument. He wouldn’t dream of telling her, but he was sick to the teeth of monuments in various stages of decay. Every time he went to one, he stifled a groan. “But being with Kalpana had other compensations. Once again they drove to her apartment and made love.” Afterwards, as they lay exhausted, Kalpana asked him about his opinion of India as he has been here long enough to form an opinion. Chris promptly said, “The whine.” and continued that for a
foreigner, there was a persistent drone of hustlers, beggars, conmen. It was a nation of disembodied hands tugging at her sleeve insistently. It was a country which had such a large and diverse variety. Then they went back.

Chris thought of himself and how similar he was to other American young men of his age. Both of them were in an identical situation with successful fathers having established business. Mr. Kapoor is a little more when compared to Chris’ father: he is colourful and he had really come up the hard way. Ajai’s father, Ram Avatar Kapoor, had arrived in Delhi after partition of India with nothing except the clothes he wore. His parents had been killed during the riots and he was left with a young wife to look after. He had started with a hand cart from which he sold utensils that he got on credit, pushing the cart from door to door. From that beginning he had “built up the business to a point where it now had a turnover of some US $ 30 million a year.” He used to follow three B’s in his business: “Butter them. Bribe them. Or Bash them.” This is his theory of the three secrets of doing business.

Now his factory has been beset by a very severe labour problem because of the emergence of a young labour leader, to whom the factory union has switched allegiance. The earlier union head was an old KapCo employee who had kept the union docile so long as he had personally been kept content with bribes of various sorts. But the workers had recently voted him out and invited the rising star of the
area named Prabal Kumar, to head their union. This guy was young, charismatic, prone to violence and keen to establish his reputation. The factory had been rocked by agitations since his arrival. Numerous meetings had been held, but every time the KapCo management agreed to one set of demands, the leader had raised a fresh one. It had begun to appear to the management that Kumar was more intent on causing a strike with the resultant publicity than getting a better deal for the workers. There was no way to persuade the workers about this. They saw Prabal Kumar as the man who would get them more than they had dared ask. In this regard Ram Avtar Kapoor had gone to the concerned ministry in the Central Government in the hope that they might intervene and prevent the strike that seemed to be developing. He sought and received an appointment with the Minister, Sevak Chand. Both Ram Avtar and the Minister had met socially earlier. But they had not met on official business. When Ram Avtar went to the Minister’s office, he greeted him warmly. The Minister was extremely tall, nearly seven feet, and he was in his late sixties. With him was his personal assistant, Sharmaji. The Minister only advised Ram Avtar that Prabal Kumar was working for the people day and night. So, he said, “play the game in the spirit of the game.”

As Prabal wished, the strike broke out. The read letter ‘Strike’ stood out boldly. Below it was written that “KapCo Industries workers on strike. Meet our just demands.” Next to it on another poster, it was written ‘Our Demands.’ It
listed thirty two, ranging from higher salaries to increased overtime allowance and ended with “Taxi fare for all workers from nearest bus stop to factory gate”.\textsuperscript{18} The number of workers had rapidly swelled as more people arrived to report for work. They grinned at each other in excitement mixed with uncertainty and some anxiety. It had been building up for a month, ever since Prabal Kumar arrived at the gate of the factory and delivered a speech that suddenly showed them how much more they could get for their labours. They raised their voices with slogans. They shouted with the words: “Our rights, our rights, our rights, our rights.”\textsuperscript{19} The roar continued and grew in volume as more workers arrived. The loudness of their voices, the sense of solidarity, even the hypnotic rhythm of their chant gave them a feeling of confidence.

When the news came to Kapoor, he was doing his prayers in the little prayer room. On a small table covered by a white cloth were three pictures, one of Lakshmi, one of Shiva and one black and white picture of Kapoor’s wife who had died eighteen years ago. She had died of cancer that had lasted for a long year. Kapoor had nearly worshipped her when she was alive and he actually did so now that she was dead. It was his greatness that he worshipped her, with the other pictures of deities for the last eighteen years which showed his love and respect towards her. It is of much curiosity that they had been wedded when he was seventeen and she was only twelve years old. He let himself many times sitting
before the picture of his wife and it was the only weakness he has. It is a “weakness that strangely enough strengthened him for the challenges of the day”. When he heard the news of the strike, he thought to himself that it was the first ever strike in the thirty-five years since he had set up the factory. It was a problem he would have to resolve by himself. Ajai Vir was too young, too idealistic to handle the rough times. He told his son, “The first priority in my life is the company. You are my only child, but you come second.” Since then Ajai had devoted nearly all his time to the company. Now his only priority is to make sure that KapCo should survive this crisis. It had become his first ever duty to solve the labour problem of the company by one or the other means. He suggested bribing Prabal Kumar as well as the workers. Because he said, “its too late to butter them and we don’t have the kind of mind required to try and bash anyone.”

Kapoor just nodded, but, he thought, good sense never broke a strike.

Mr. Sunder informed Chris that labours had gone on strike when he woke up an hour late, had dressed and was waiting for Kalpana. Sunder had his own opinion about the strike. He said, “I do not know what is to become of this country when it is full of such wretched people. I think there are no strikes in America. That is how the country has become so great. But India will go to dogs with such scoundrels…..” Matters had not been going as well for both father and son. They discussed everything to put off the strike. The Central Government is not willing to
help. The only thing is that the Government alone can pressure the workers. So they must do something to find a way to make them act. To do this there are two ways: one is to instigate violence so that there is wide publicity, second is to plant stories in the press about what a good man Prabal is and how much he is trying to do for the workers. If they attack Prabal through the press, it will make him a martyr. He will claim, “It’s a capitalist controlled press.”

If the press praises him, it might force Sevak Chand to act because Delhi is his power base and Prabal could be a threat to him if he becomes too popular. And to create violence is easy for Ram Avtar. For this he planned to mingle some men of his own into the group of workers and make them attack the senior managers of the factory and stone the factory and light a few fires. He had assigned the work to Verma and promised him the directorship of the factory.

A few days later, Chris was informed that Sharmaji was coming to the Kapoors for a private dinner. He decided to skip lunch that day, having learned the hard way that dinners organized by the Indian rich were long and awesomely sumptuous. Everytime Chris went to one of these dinners anywhere in Delhi; he wondered “how anyone could believe that India was full of starving people.”

Chris thought that they were going to bribe Sharmaji that night to solve the problem with the help of the Minister. He was introduced to Sharmaji as “our foreign collaborator.” Ram Avtar desperately needed Sharmaji’s help to break the
strike. Because Sharmaji is the main force in the ministry; and he is the only man who can convince the Minister in the matter. Ram Avtar also hinted at the expenses: “And whatever the expenses involved, naturally we will bear all of them.” But Sharmaji protested the idea of money; “Corruption has become root of all evil. But to be very honest, I do not indulge. I am in game only to improve myself.” Sharmaji assured Ram Avtar to help in this regard and asked him to come to his office. But Chris thought that Sharmaji was not going to do anything without the minister’s consent.

Next day, Ajai informed Chris that they were going to meet the Minister the day after and that it was going to be a critical meeting. There might be some confidential discussion. So Ajai hesitated to ask Chris to accompany them but Chris wanted to accompany them, as they had an agreement on co-operation and he could be useful. Ram Avtar agreed for that because he said, “If Stark Industries ever discovered the real size of our company, there would be great inconvenience for us.” There might be one ‘B’ used with the Minister, but Ram Avtar said, “Bribery means different things to different people. One man’s food is another’s poison.” He wanted to find out the weaknesses of the Minister and to pamper him there. When they reached the Minister’s office, the receptionist said that his name was not on the list of people to see the Minister. So they had to try on Sharmaji’s extension on phone. When they met Sharmaji, he made it easy for them to meet the
Minister. They went in the cabin of the Minister where they discussed the problem of the labour strike. The Minister agreed with the fact that the strike was wrong and it should be stopped. He also said, “Nehruji said industries were the modern temples of India and need to be protected”\textsuperscript{31} So Ajai said to Chris that they should grab some of the workers who did not want to go on strike and encourage them to come back to work. And the police would protect such workers as ordered by Sharmaji. And so they did. Verma took the lead and visited the homes of some of the workers in the slum area; he offered them some money to come back to the work. If they keep money and refuse to come to work the next day, Verma said that, the workers knew he would return again and that time with more gentlemen to handle them.

Chris looked around in horror: “The shacks were made of sack and wood. The stench of urine, excreta and decaying junk made it impossible for him to breathe. He put a handkerchief over his nose and took short breaths……This must be what hell is like.”\textsuperscript{32} There was the laughter of children at every corner. Chris thought that with such misery all around, how they were happy in that condition of living. If it was in the states it would have created a revolution. He concluded that they were happy because they had to vote. By then onwards he had begun to see beyond the obvious, overwhelming poverty. When he heard the Hindi music, he was stunned. When he looked up accidentally at the roofs he gaped. “There was a
scattering of television aerials poised casually on several roofs. Such symbols of the middle class life in this cemetery of human hopes were like seeing a neon McDonald’s sign glowing in the middle of a graveyard.”  

Chris gasped in bafflement, stepping hugely over an artistically composed pile of shit. “Nothing in this country is what it seems”, he looked back at the squiggles of excreta and suspect, “May be it’s a form of art among India’s poor.” The news of Verma’s visit reached Prabal Kumar. Ram Avtar thought that in this case no doubt, Prabal Kumar would meet such a humiliation that he would be destroyed and that is what the Minister wanted. For Chris the whole night was “like the night before a big game, with its hopes for victory, its fear of defeat and the horror of injury.” The next day did not go as well for any of them. They had entered the great industrial belt linking Delhi to Faridabad and Chris thought that diversity of factories was great for India, he wondered whose bright idea it was to place them so close to the capital city. It guaranteed pollution, not just with the factories and the power stations, but with the armies of workers and managers in their buses, cars, scooters and motorcycles. And it is certain that an endless stream of job seekers who would inevitably settle in the city and add to its population problems. Chris thought with some pride that “I’m the only football player in American history to worry about the population problems of Third World countries.” Before Chris could ruminate on his imagination, their car entered the highway towards the KapCo plant. There
they saw the workers on strike; some were blocking the road, some sitting, some were still asleep, but they all let the car pass. There arrived police as instructed by Sharmaji, to control the workers if there arose any violation. Some people in three buses arranged by Verma also came. Prabal Kumar also arrived. There were some journalists who came there with the instructions of Ajai Vir. Verma’s workers from the bus began to move towards the workers on strike with slogans. They came face to face and the slogan shouting on both sides intensified. Soon they began to push each, and nothing serious happened. Suddenly one of the workers, no one could tell which side he belonged, fell down with his mouth bleeding. At this stage Verma’s workers tried to enter into the factory gates; Prabal looked at the shamiana and raised his hand. Then suddenly a group of men came racing out carrying lathis and iron rods. The armed men of Prabal began to pulverize the workers Verma had hired. “Blood and flesh flew, the workers screamed, but they had nowhere to go because Prabal’s men had blocked one side, while his thugs were howling and slashing on the other.”

Police were kept quiet observing all this. The inspector had not ordered them to act. They were regretful but firm. Prabal’s men stopped the massacre with his order. He in a loud voice announced to all the workers, “See the strength of Prabal Kumar. And remember that this is your strength too. Let your maalik see what happens to those who betray the workers.”

The buses that brought Verma’s workers had been used to carry them to a nearby
hospital. When Ram Avtar, Ajai and Chris came to Sharmaji and asked him why this had happened, he said clearly that “The Minister did not mention about protecting the workers. He mentioned as per Nehruji’s wishes, about protecting the factory. This was done. That is what the police were there for.” After that Ram Avtar met the Minister Sevak Chand to discuss the matter. He urged before the Minister that “there has been a murderous attack on my workers and on the outskirts of your very own constituency…..I am not opposed to unions…..but Mr.Prabal Kumar’s methods are violent and vicious. They are unacceptable in a democratic society…Mr.Kumar be arrested and brought to real as an instigator of the attack and an accomplice. I demand that justice be done and union goondaism be eliminated sir.”

The Minister Sevak Chand was extremely tall, nearly seven feet, and legendary for his courtesy, his thread bare clothes, and his devotion to attributing everything he said to either Mahatma Gandhi or Pundit Nehru or some other Indian Prime Minister. When Ram Avtar introduced Chris to the Minister, he again took the reference of the then PM’s words: “foreign collaborations are most welcome and will bring prosperity to both parties and our great countries.” When Chris was introduced as the son of the maker of plastic buckets in America, the Minister as usual took the name of Indira Gandhi, and said that “Indiraji herself had ordered that plastic buckets be used when washing clothes in her home instead of iron
buckets.”\textsuperscript{42} When Ram Avtar mentioned the word violence, the Minister dragged Gandhiji and said, “Let us eschew violence”.\textsuperscript{43} And continued that “The law will naturally take its own course. Rajivji often said, ‘Nobody howsoever mighty is above the law.’”\textsuperscript{44} The Minister at last decided that it was too dangerous to take any decision in this matter and so said nothing. Instead Sharmaji assured them that a magisterial enquiry would be initiated and as per its recommendations, action would be taken to the fullest extent of the law. When Ajai insisted to take action, the Minister came to a decision and ordered Sharmaji, “Ensure full security to the factory. Take all measures to protect the Kapoor family, their residence and all present. No threat must be allowed to occur to them or to their lives. Monitor the situation personally.”\textsuperscript{45} The action was taken immediately. By the time Ram Avtar returned to his Punjabi Bagh residence, he found policemen armed with rifles at the gate and all around the house. Ajai believed that the Minister would take care of Prabal and their problems would be over. But Ram Avtar disagreed because the Minister had said nothing at all about helping them to end the strike.

When the news of the massacre appeared in the papers, more and more company workers around Delhi were seeking to get Prabal to head their unions. Overnight, he had become the leading trade union leader of Delhi. Political parties began to compete with each other in inviting him to be associated with them. Prabal informed the press that “I have no ambitions of becoming a political leader.
I am only interested in serving the toiling worker whose labour creates wealth for the proprietor and the country, but who is himself denied a fair share of the fruits of his toil.”46 This annoyed Ajai Vir and his father. They tried to negotiate with Prabal’s men, but his men were not interested in it. Ram Avtar wanted to talk with Prabal directly. A week later, Ram Avtar sat before his wife’s photograph and said loudly, “It looks like no one can help us…..We’re near the breaking point……our main banker refused to let us postpone the repayment of either the interest or the capital that we borrowed from them.”47 At the same time the banker called him and told that the bank was preparing legal steps to attach his property in case of default. This pressurized him and he decided to meet Prabal. When they met, Prabal spoke a few sentences quietly and went away without listening to Ram Avtar. He then consoled himself and conveyed the things to Ajai and Chris that “He wants that we announce the immediate and total acceptance of all the demands…..and he’ll call off the strike the same day. And the workers will resume duties from the day itself……the first three months we pay the workers exactly as per the demands….after that we pay them less the next month…..the next month we pay even less and so on, till in the seventh month we go back to paying them just what we were paying them before the strike.”48 The workers will swallow it without fail because Prabal guarantees it. He also guaranteed it that there would be no further work stoppages of any sort, or any labour trouble of any kind whatsoever for a
period of ten years. To deal all this he wanted fifteen crore rupees. Ram Avtar accepted the deal, but Ajai and Chris denied agreeing. Because when looked at the whole deal, Prabal was at winning side and KapCo was at losing side. He would become the hero of the workers.

Ram Avtar admitted that he was losing the game because he was baffled by all that happened. In disgust he said, “Liberalization is in full swing. The Government is actively seeking foreign investments. Yet they’re allowing the strike to continue, they are letting this union leader get out of hand…..It will finish the main advantage India has in attracting capital. It makes no sense…”49 Ajai Vir expostulated that “They’re fools. All politicians are fools. Crooks and criminals and idiots who’ll ruin this country.”50 Ram Avtar finally came to the conclusion that something was happening and he had to find out what it was. So they went to Sharmaji and both Ajai and Chris apologized him and asked for the help once again. Sharmaji told that Prabal was secretly supported by Jha, who was Sevak Chand’s rival in Delhi. And said that politics was one thing and that was just local Delhi politics. It was a small matter. But liberalization was a national economic policy. So “the Congress wants to let a hero rise who can squash the Communists and who they must have means of controlling, that we know nothing about.”51 At last, desperately, Ram Avtar asked Sharmaji that what he could do to get the Minister’s help. Sharmaji for the first time clearly said “Make the minister
Then onwards it has become their foremost duty to do anything to make the Minister smile. They tried to meet Sonia Gandhi in this matter thinking that if “Sonia speaks, the Minister will have to smile.”

On the other side Ajai decided to finish off Prabal with the help of goonda politicians, but failed to do that. Ajai told Chris that to kill Prabal “we need not a politician but a thug.” So he took a bold decision to kill Prabal Kumar with the help of an underworld don. He found one lady don, called Mirchi, who was living in a slum. She took fifty thousand rupees for the work. And after three days she disappeared doing nothing. In anger Ajai with his men attacked the slum and one of the slum people was hit seriously. It appeared like an attempt to murder. It created lots of problems; police enquired Ram Avtar and did wait for Ajai who had gone to Goa on the advice of the sub-inspector to take rest. Anyhow Ram Avtar cleared the matter with the police. The police were of the opinion that Ajai was “an American educated MBA from a public school background, so he’s hardly likely to be involved in murder attempt.” So Ajai Vir was “never questioned at all. And no one of course even thought of speaking to Chris.”

Kalpana was disconsolate as the problem was getting worse and worse. She wanted to solve the police problem with the help of her friend, who was the wife of a police friend of Ajai. “Chris had long since given up trying to unravel the Gordian knot of Indian relationships but he knew they were wide-spread, strong
Kalpana asked Chris to help Ram Avtar with some money as loan and the only way she could see out was to pay off Prabal Kumar. Chris agreed because of Kalpana. But Ram Avtar said, “It’s not a question of ethics…..It’s just that we have no reason to believe that paying off Prabal Kumar will work….it might be what he wants. But it’s not what the politicians want. And Prabal Kumar is only a pawn in their hands….If we pay him off, we will find that we have bankrupted KapCo, bankrupted ourselves and Chris too.” Ram Avtar was upset and sighed in deep sorrow and said, “We have just not been able to find a way to make the minister smile, and that has finished us.”

At last Ram Avtar Kapoor had found a way to make the minister smile. He held a private meeting with Sevak Chand and discussed what should be done. Accordingly a press conference was held urgently to announce what Ram Avtar had decided. Verma welcomed everyone to the press meet. And announced, “We have given deep thought to all the demands and based upon what we feel is fair and just, both to the workers and to KapCo and according to the wage structure that is prevalent all over India, we have come to a decision.” Then Ram Avtar addressed the press meet: “The wage structure of the workers is at par with those of other companies everywhere….It would not be ethical to have an underpaid workforce, nor would it be good business sense. Yet……it would be impossible to agree to the demands made by the Prabal Kumar – led union, without making
KapCo completely uncompetitive……we are prepared to offer a 25 per cent increase to all workers in their basic wage, as well as a further 25 per cent linked to performance. We believe this is not just fair, but generous.”61 The next day the newspapers were full of the KapCo decision. All the papers agreed that this was the crucial test of Prabal’s credibility. Prabal sensed this too and arrived at the factory gates to exhort the workers to hold firm. He characterized Ram Avtar’s offer as charity to a beggar. He thundered “we are partners. We are the real owners.”62

Meanwhile, another group of workers held a rally in Delhi, agreeing to the terms offered and demanding that they be allowed to resume work. Prabal denounced them. But Ram Avtar ordered that the factory gates be opened and kept opened day and night, so that whichever worker wanted to resume work, could go in. he described the strike as “a family dispute and which family is there which doesn’t have quarrels…….It is these little quarrels that make us value each other more.”63 Alarmed by this, the Government sent armed police to the site. A few days later at dawn, the workers who wanted to end the strike and who numbered about a hundred and fifty had entered the factory. There they produced chains, they had tied around their bodies and chained themselves by their legs to the machines and padlocked. They announced to the journalists that they would allow their chains to be sawed away once they were assured that they could resume work.
Prabal stood outside the factory all day exhorting them through a loud speaker to come out. The police waited with guns ready, but no violence occurred. Towards the evening, Prabal returned to Delhi. The workers cheered. They ate with a special relish the food the guards brought for them and joked among themselves before lying down on the floor to sleep. In the midnight, a fire broke out in the factory and spread rapidly. After the strike had started, a lot of the raw material had been left unused and uncollected around the machines. This ignited with the heat and the entire building began to burn. The guards and the other striking workers outside came running but “they were helpless in trying to break the chains tying the workers to their machines.” Everyone milled around helplessly listening to the shrieks of the helpless workers being roasted alive. “All the workers inside died as well as three guards who had waited too long and been overcome by the smoke. Totally a hundred and fifty two people died in the inferno.”

The next day, the opposition parties, the press, the industry bodies turned upon the Government. Public opinion was horrified. The BJP demanded the resignation of the government. The CPM staged violent rallies calling for the rolling back of the liberalization programme. “This is just the first episode,” one leader warned, “All of India will lie in ashes by the time multinational companies are through.” The industry apex associations pointed out the dangers in allowing irresponsible and violent trade union activities. Foreign investors began to express
apprehensions at the suitability of India as a safe destination for their funds. The government began to move after the major newspapers express the horrors. Prabal Kumar was arrested under a section of the law that did not give him the right to get bail. His associates were also taken into custody. “A retired judge was appointed to investigate the entire tragedy with clear stern and explicit instructions that he deliver his findings with all possible speed, bearing in mind of course the need for a full and thorough enquiry that fulfils the need for truth, objectivity and the ends of natural justice.”

The Prime Minister himself in a statement regretted the tragedy but felt that “the soul of liberalization was not affected.”

In Punjabi Bagh Ajai Vir, Chris and Ram Avtar sat shocked and haggard. They were thinking of rebuilding the factory with the help of insurance within six months. Ram Avtar said sitting in front of his wife’s photo, “We’re the victims. Everything will be fine…… We’ve won. The company is safe. We have saved our son’s future.” The politicians, the people, the press and all were unanimous that the villain of the tragedy was Prabal Kumar. Even if he was not convicted, since there was still no tangible proof that he was responsible for setting the fire, it would be a long time before he was released from jail. In any event, his career as a trade union leader and politician was over. Chris was astonished by the events that took place. He confessed, “Indian politics really ain’t no place for an American football player.”
Some miles away, Sevak Chand sat in his vast office, with all the main newspapers lying scattered in front of him. The hooded eyes scanned the headlines, the comments and the reactions. Then satisfied, his eyes closed in thought. “When he had finished thinking, when no one was in the office, when no one saw, the Minister smiled. And smiled. And smiled.”71

Conclusion:

As a novel of social realism, *Making The Minister Smile* is full of humour, laughter, wit and surprises with a subtle tinge of social satire. It takes a close look at the corruption and red-tapism rampant in the Indian political circles and establishes Mathur’s sardonic sense of humour yet again. While on the one hand there is the American protagonist Chris Stark, trying to give a new look to his father’s business, on the other hand there is the invincible ‘Mantriji’, and the portrayal of these two central characters have assured this book a permanent place in the field of literature.

The story unfolds with the controversy surrounding a company and its workers’ union. How the workers, the union leader and the management strive and yet fail to come to an amicable solution to resolve the factory problem makes up the crux of the story. The author has maintained a socially realistic approach and has consciously avoided myths while depicting his characters and the
circumstances that encircle them. All this while however, he also succeeds in maintaining his wry sense of humour. For instance, the way Chris is shocked when he meets Kalpana Singh who shatters the image of the perfect Indian girl he had in mind, one who symbolizes chastity and innocence is hilarious.

East and West have forged an awkward relationship in the age of economic reforms. Politics has broken free of the idealism of the founding fathers and is floundering in sleaze. How appropriate then, that the book should appear at the time of the Hawala saga. Mathur describes the complicated backroom deals and bloody vendettas that lie beneath the surface of everyday India. The Manmohanomics generation capers in a universe of parties; promiscuous US-returned designers and drunken arrivists from Patna jostle in a fog of drink. Chris is seized by lust for his host's fiancee and she, svelte and dusky, reveals that the New Indian Woman has undergone a transformation far more far reaching than the economy.

Mathur has written of an India that is so funny that it is quite sinister. The book is strewn with recognizably demented characters and racily written Hinglish abounds. Perhaps this highly topical little novel is sometimes a little cliched; yet it is always a mirror of one’s contradictory self as one start out on the road to a globalised society.
PANKAJ MISHRA’S *THE ROMANTICS*

**Introduction:**

Pankaj Mishra was born in 1969. He attended Allahabad University and received his M.Phil. from Jawaharlal Nehru University. He is a regular contributor to the New York Review of Books, The New Statesman, and The Times Literary Supplement, as well as several Indian publications. He served as chief editor of Harper Collins (India). He is currently editing an anthology of Indian Writing. He divides his time between New Delhi and Simla. He has written a best-selling travel book and a novel. *The Romantics* is his only novel published in 2000. It is that rare novel in which the nature of the story perfectly matches the means of its telling. It is well stated with a lovely use of language and semiotics.

**Plot:**

Mishra’s passionate ambitious but not entirely successful debut follows the sentimental education of its ingenuous, sensitive Indian narrator. In precise brooding language, the narrator Samar, relates his own tragic romance and demonstrates his struggle for self-understanding.

Twenty years old and indigent, Samar has already spent three years at the University of Allahabad when he arrives in Benares in the harsh winter of 1989,
hoping to learn the ways of the Western world. In a cold room he rents from an opium-dazed musician, Samar devotes his time to reading Schopenhauer and Turgenev - the sort of big books that make idleness attractive each filled with the promise of wisdom and Knowledge. When a middle-aged English woman, Diana West, decides to create a social life for him, Samar is thrust into a circle of American and European expatriates. Through Miss West, Samar the young Brahmin, meets and falls in love with the ravishing Catherine, in flight from her oppressively bourgeois French parents and involved with a hopeless Sitar player named Anand.

The impassioned opinions of Miss West and the foreigners alert Samar to his own (perceived) inadequacies. But Samar gradually realizes that the Westerners seek an India that does not really exist, an Edenic setting of self-sufficient villages, consciously ethnic Knickknacks and Ayurvedic medicine. In stark contrast to the yearning, decadent drifters in the secretive Rajesh, a campus agitator whose Brahmin admirers overlook his intellectual flaws.

Samar’s later travels with Catherine awaken romantic feelings previously suppressed by his own traditions, and he feels keenly the struggle between his ancestral obligations (he visits his sick father in Pondicherry) and his new emotional life. As his hopes for a relationship with Catherine diminish, he gets a chance to teach English to children in Dharmashala, where he attempts to embrace
his solitude. In a denouement that strains credulity, chance encounters with the foreigners from Benares persistently disturb Samar’s peace of mind. Mishra’s descriptions of significant events and the Indian landscape are sensuous. One can smell the cumin and coriander seeds; feel the hum of large crowds in the streets.

**Analysis:**

On the banks of the Ganges, the holy city of Benares groans and heaves along the fault line where modern India presses against its living past, as pilgrims bathe in the sacred waters, while the bodies of the dead await by the thousands their turns on the burning Ghats. Into this city comes in all innocence young Samar to complete his University studies and take the civil-service examinations that will determine his future. An uprooted Brahman, bearing the responsibilities of his caste but shorn of its privileges, Samar, obsessed by the intellectual culture of the West but shaped by ancient obligations due his ancestors, finds himself suspended between conflicted worlds. He is the classic young man from the provinces, propelled by curiosity and passion beyond his comprehension. He will emerge with a story to tell: a story of lost illusions and the joy and pain of love.

On his journey of self-discovery, Samar is accompanied by two guides: Rajesh an impoverished fellow Brahman, a hanger-on at the University who has mysterious powers over a band of student malcontents that has made him its
leader; and Miss West, his neighbour in the ramshackle lodging where he has taken a room. Miss West - English, fortyish, her good looks so far intact - introduced Samar to her circle of Western friends who have come to Benares seeking a culture more resonant than their own. From Rajesh, Samar will discover the dead end to which that culture has come. When he arrives in Benares, Samar knows Miss West’s world only through the books he has read. By the time he is ready to leave the holy city, Samar’s Brahman reserves will have been tested to the breaking point by Miss West’s beautiful friend Catherine and by the horror to which Rajesh has exposed him. He survives by the grace of character and intelligence with which his brilliant creator - one of the most promising talents of his Anglo-Indian generation - has endowed him in this astonishingly mature first novel.

The title of the novel “The Romantics” plainly suggests that it is a novel about a group of romantics. The word ‘romantic’ has come “to mean so many things that, by itself, it means nothing at all.” In fact, it can mean anything the user wants it to mean. The writer does not use the word ‘romantic’ so often in this novel. Even when he uses it, he does not go beyond its conventional connotation. When he uses it first, it is to describe Debbie’s idea of romanticism: “you know, Love in the Time of Cholera. It’s my all-time favorite novel….It’s just so romantic…..I just love the way he writes. I mean, the people in his books, they are so emotional, so free with their feelings, their bodies, everything.” His description
of the novel betrays that to her romanticism, means being emotional, being free and being away from life. Samar, the narrator and the focalizer, also associates romanticism with imagining things, with sadness and disappointment, solitude and dreams, with the hidden past and mystery when he observes about Miss West: “I knew nothing of Miss West, but had presumed to see sadness and disappointment in her past: this was the romantic idea that had been spawned by the idle solitude of those fog-bound first days in Benares.” Elsewhere Samar, a thinly disguised portrait of the novelist himself, associates romanticism with love. He terms the private affairs of Catherine and her friends, their current and past relationships, romantic. Love again figures with romance when Samar mulls over the question of Catherine, “But have you been in love?” “Of love and romance, the less regulated but natural order of things, I knew only from books.” There are many other such passages in the novel which offer nothing new about romanticism, which include love, desires and dreams, hidden past, imagination and being away from the harsh realities of life. When the author calls his major characters romantics, he means only this. The major characters in the novel are Samar, Miss West, Catherine, Anand and Rajesh.

The novel begins at a riverside temple in Benares, the holy city. It is the winter of 1989 when Samar, the protagonist, a young college student, asks the Pujari for a cheap place to live. Samar is eager to read in preparation of an
important exam, thus Benares is the perfect place for him, it looks like the city
encourages the people do spend lazy lives or seemingly meditating periods that
involve a certain nostalgia for the past.

    Punditji overhears the conversation of Samar and Pujari, and proposes a
room at what he calls Indian rent. Punditji spends his days in a haze of opium and
only wakes up to give Sitar lessons to hippie-like Western students with long hair
and dyed shirts. His wife in estranged from him and claims that she has never
come downstairs in fifteen years. The other tenant in the house is a middle-aged
English woman, Miss West. Samar, by no means socially adept, becomes friend
with his neighbour, Miss West. Miss West appears to be a mysterious lady to
Samar: “Her presence in Benares, in a tiny room on the roof, where she appears to
do nothing all day except read and listen to Western classical music, was a mystery
to me. I thought it had to do with some great sadness in her past.” Miss West’ is
the name given to her by the local shopkeepers. But her real first name was Diana.
Once a great beauty, clean high forehead, hazel-brown eyes, slender neck and
straight blonde hair, and still well preserved, Miss West introduces Samar to her
friends, Western “seekers” who enjoy discussing their private affairs as much as
enacting them. The very notion of private affairs seems to fascinate Samar, as does
his suspicion that Miss West harbors a mysterious sadness in her past.
His own private affair arrives in the form of Catherine, a young French friend of Miss West’s. Catherine lives with her Indian lover Anand, and has plans to help him pursue a musical career in Paris; despite this attachment, she and Samar become friends. He frequents Catherine’s house, fearing that his eagerness to visit has something coarse in it, and unhealthy. He cannot help himself. Samar’s relationship with Catherine is more intimate than with any one else in the novel. Catherine is involved in love tangles and had affairs in the past. To some extent this is true about Catherine’s friends like Mark, Debbie and Sarah. However, what is romantic about them is their rejection of the familiar and the acceptance of the exotic. Mark has been interested in knowing poverty and pain, and suffering in India at first hand “and realizing that there is a whole world outside America where people don’t even have the basic things in life.”  

Mark had pursued different careers at different stages of his life: poet, dish-washer, printer, Tibetan Buddhist, carpenter and traveller through such remote lands as Ecuador and the Congo. Debbie is a perfectly ordinary American girl Mark has fallen in love with. What she wants to do in Benares is sunbathe and get a great tan, and to get converted to Buddhism. Catherine too comes to Benares in order to get as far away as possible from her oppressively bourgeois parents, discovers style and beauty in the most unexpected places and falls in love with Anand at one of Miss West’s musical soirees. All of them appear to have been tired and bored with their lives in their
native countries and are full of the urge to try something new, something exactly opposite to what they have got in their own countries. There is nothing typically romantic about them. What Samar says about Catherine’s other visitors from France is more or less true about Catherine and her friends like Mark, Debbie and Sarah: “Most of them couldn’t think of India as anything other than an exotic hotbed of illiteracy, poverty and religion: they would come back from their travels around Benares, speaking excitedly of sadhus who had been standing on one leg for ten years, of beggar children without limbs and of the huge rats scurrying about in the alleys.”

Catherine, whom Miss West calls very pretty and whose extraordinary beauty Samar finds distracting however, sets herself apart though basically belonging to this group, because of her relationship first with Anand and then with Samar. To Samar she appears to be a mysterious person whose mysterious background in Paris could not be figured out by him by such clues as were offered. However, more mystifying than this was “the peculiar chemistry between her and Anand.” Her relationship with Samar is not simple and clear. She says about her love for Samar: “It has been such a joy first to see our proximity grow and then open up entire new fields of understanding, of affection and of ourselves as we are.”
The difference between the student Samar, and Miss West’s way of seeing things is soon set, when she asks why he chose to go to university of Allahabad. He reflects on the fact that after his mother died, his father retreated to an Ashram and nobody questioned him. Samar’s mother has recently passed away, and his father, following “an old rite of passage: the withdrawal from the active world in late middle age, the retreat into the self”, has retired to a distant ashram in Pondicherry. Finished with college, Samar lives on a small allowance and studies big books by Western writers such as Schopenhauer, Turgenev and Flaubert. He wants to read and do as little as possible beside that. In the same way, he goes to University in Allahabad because, he says, “three generations of my mother’s family had gone to the University in Allahabad, a sister city of Benares, and it was to Allahabad that I had gone.” Samar is surprised because he had always thought that prejudice against female education was a prerogative of poor societies. He also wonders when Miss West tells in a calmer tone: “you know I never went to University. My father belonged to a generation where people didn’t bother with educating their daughters.”

The novel comes to a turning point when Miss West decides that she wants to give a party to celebrate the fact that Samar has come. Samar has never been to a party and associated it with “empty frivolity and moral laxity.” At this point Samar says, “my view of Miss West altered; I now saw her as an organizer of
A group of different people join them; there is Mark, an American who is studying Ayurvedic medicine and has an impressive curriculum; then there are Sarah and Debbie, two women who are interested in Buddhism and meditate on the Ghats of the Ganges. Debbie tells of how much upset she was when she met an Indian scholar with a British public school accent who asked her all sorts of aggressive questions on the fact that she was thinking of converting to Buddhism. He said that Westerners have completely “misconstrued Buddhism,” that their minds are unprepared and unequipped to receive a philosophy of negation and privation and they can only be “part-time Buddhists”. There is truth on both sides: on one hand, it is true that in some cases the interest of Westerners for oriental philosophies is just a desire to experience something new and exotic or a desire for the spirituality that has been lost in Western cultures; on the other hand, in the East, people have the preconception that the Western mind is not able to engross their philosophies, which is not always true. At the party there is also Catherine, a beautiful French woman who has a love story with a Sitar player called Anand. Samar is immediately fascinated with Catherine, as other men in the group.

It appears rather incongruous to Samar that she should be in love with Anand. “With her knowledge of literature, her instinct for style and elegance, she was the cultured European woman who for some, half understood reasons, had
chosen to live in Benares, and had, for even less well understood reasons, fallen in love with an Indian man from a very different background and outlook."

She, however, is apparently in deep love with Anand.

At this point the setting changes, because Samar and Catherine go on a trip to Mussoori, on the foot hills of the Himalayas. Here they are no more in a chaotic city but in the woods. They reach a shelter and the only attraction there, apart from the landscape, is a small temple, where the priest tells them his story. Catherine thinks that his life of privations is sad and Samar understands that Catherine is hungry for love; and amid Catherine’s endearments, Samar clumsily loses his innocence, and he claims a growing conviction that he had all along been marked in some mysterious way, that after the dull, pointless years of drift. He had been predestined for the moment when he had met Catherine - the encounter in which some of the richness of life and the world were revealed to him.

Yet, when the two return to Benares, Catherine swears Samar to silence and continues to plan her future with Anand. Samar becomes a patient prisoner to Catherine’s moods and begins to suspect that the person with very ordinary concerns was more authentic and tangible than the person who had bestowed Catherine’s gift of tenderness and happiness on him. Their intimacy, despite his continued hopes is never renewed.
As it is said earlier, Catherine is in deep love with Anand. She takes him to Paris and carries his responsibility on her shoulders. Before leaving Benares for Paris, Miss West tells Samar that she is neurotic about Anand even with the prospects of her parents’ hostility and almost no help from anyone in Paris. In Paris too she went on about him, though in a different way. “She kept talking about Anand to her friends; he was her little trophy from India. Anand this, Anand that.” She confesses her love for Anand in the last letter she writes to Samar and also holds him responsible for spoiling her relationship with Anand.

Yet her attitude is ambivalent and contradictory. She loves him but wants to get away from him. She does not take Anand to Mussoori. Sometimes, she is just patronizing him. She also drifts towards Samar and feels blessed in her intimate friendship with him. Finally, her relationship with Anand also falls to pieces.

Catherine thought that Anand would be a great Sitarist one day. That’s why she loved him. When her dream or imagination or illusion breaks down, she came to the conclusion to avoid him. There appears to be some truth in the words of Miss West: “It collapsed once it became clear that Anand was no Ravi Shankar. I sort of knew it wouldn’t last long, but I was surprised by how quickly it folded.”

After giving up both Anand and Samar her romance with the East is over and she becomes a typical Western woman who keeps changing her boy friends
and at last plans to marry a stock broker. As Miss West remarks and she is our only source of information: “It was all very odd: she sounded so much like her mother; she wanted children, security, stability, all those middle class things. All that bohemianism had gone.”  

Samar’s infatuation with Catherine doesn’t end up very well because, after a trip to Pondicherry to visit his father, Catherine leaves India with Anand. Consequently, Samar retreats to Dharmashala, where he teaches in a primary school, spending a lot of time alone and trekking a lot.

After several years, the city calls him back. He is no more scarred by the experience with Catherine, but still aware that the time spent in Benares was a time of loss, when he did not know what he wanted. Everybody leaves Benares after having realized that something is not going well: Miss West is leaving India for good with the realization that her sentimental life is completely ruined and Catherine leaves India for Paris with Anand, hoping that in France he could find a job as a musician. Once Anand tells the Tabla player that “when I come back I want to open up a school for Sitar players, free training, free meals, everything”  after getting “Good money” from the concert he was going to give in Paris.

Samar was in a mood to recall all that was happened in his life. Miss West appeared to him a mysterious lady. When she cried and learnt on the shoulders of
Samar in the morning after her night party, he observes: “I had a sudden oppressive sense of the density of memories, wounds, ambitions, regrets, seething inside the body leaning against mine.”

The collage of photographs in her room made Samar stand awkwardly. She exclaimed, “It’s all a waste!” The story of her love for Christopher, a married man with children, her hopeless situation, her loving too much, all very well fit in the frame of romanticism. This however, is Samar’s vision of Miss West. In reality as told by Catherine, “her personality, her sense of humour and malice, and even her love for music,” “dissatisfactions in her bright eyes and offhand manner, neurotic irritations appearing in her brusque speech”, her behaviour towards her friends including Samar, do not endow her with a romantic halo. She is not as self-expressive, sentimental and averse to company as a romantic would be. Even about her hopeless love, she behaves like a typical English woman.

Another character that has a deeper relationship with Samar is Rajesh. He is persistently present in the consciousness of Samar, though more often at the periphery than at the centre. He is Samar’s double: both the narrator and his friend discover that they have affinities with Frederic Moreau, the hero of Flaubert’s ‘Sentimental Education’ and they might have exchanged their tracks just for a single accident or a deliberate act. With similar aspirations and emotions what prevent them from swapping their role are the circumstances they fall into. Rajesh
doesn’t belong to the common run of humanity, with “a slight glint of uncertainty in his probing dark brown eyes” and “something buttoned-up, inscrutable, in his expression.” With his love of Urdu poetry, his special fondness for the Pakistani poet Faiz and Iqbal, a bag of pistols in his room, his long absences from the campus which Samar attributed to some secret mistress, the suspicion of his complicity in violence on the BHU campus, his patronage of Brahmin students, his critical but contradictory views about Nehru-Gandhi family, all tend to make him a mysterious figure. Rajesh spoke not only of Rajiv Gandhi, who he thought “was out of touch with Indian realities”, but also of his mother, Indira, and then of Pandit Nehru. He was certain that “the Nehru-Gandhi family had caused great damage to India.” He said that Nehru wasn’t tough enough on corruption. And circumstances had forced Nehru into being excessively accommodating. His words are full of contradictions. Even Samar’s journey to his village and meeting his mother doesn’t explain everything about him. He learns from his mother that Rajesh, “had worked since he was thirteen, first in the maize fields, and then at a carpet factory in Benares where he had gone to evening school and done well enough to enter the University.” Rajesh also tells him that he had read *Sentimental Education* and that it was the story he knew well. “It is the story of my world. I know these people well.”
All the same, Samar remains puzzled over what Rajesh could have in common with Frederic Moreau or any of the doomed members of his generation. He is shocked when he is told by Pratap that Rajesh has graduated from being a member of a criminal gang specializing in debt collection on behalf of a group of local money lenders and businessmen to become a contract killer, a highly risky profession.

Rajesh’s reality, if he can be considered a realistic man, lies in his breaking the mould, his troubled past, his being exploited in the fields and factories and in his dreams of success in the bourgeois world. It also lies in his combining fondness for Urdu poetry and interests in literature with his hidden criminal activities. His disillusionment, the crashing of his dreams, his identification of himself with the hero of Sentimental Education, his fascination for Faiz’s lines -

“This is not that long-looking for break of day
Not that clear dawn in quest of which those comrades
Set out…..”

make him very eligible for a realist. His identification with the gloomy sentimentality expressed in the lines of Iqbal is also proof of this:

“Entangled in the labyrinth of his learning,
Lost count of good and ill;
Enchained the sunbeams, yet his hand no down
On Life’s dark night unfurled.”
He had a hidden past - past not of love and longings - but the past of rebelliousness, miseries, struggles and dreams, a mysterious present and a dismal future.

Miss West, Rajesh, Catherine and Anand and also Catherine’s friends are not romantics by temperament or vision but by the needs of their self, the needs of their youth. Miss West realizes this while commenting on Catherine and Anand’s relationship: “When you are young you have these desires like everyone else; you’re greedy for love, you feel then that the world owes you your happiness; you feel you are entitled to it simply by being alive…..”

Samar the narrator, the focal character in the novel, is also faced with the existential problems of the youth. He is as Miss West calls him, an autodidact who goes to study BA at what he considers to be a decaying old university, Allahabad University, and comes to Benares only to read and not to do anything besides the vague aspiration of taking civil services examination. A lonely person, his aim in life is to be a scholar, to pursue study for the sake of study. He is a little restive and wishes to leave the ruts of conventional society not having much faith in casteism and the past heritage of the family. The past casts its shadows on him, appears and reappears but does not haunt him. The present causes discontent in him but does not make him a rebel. He has hopes of future but cherishes no dreams about it, builds no castles in the air. He is not romantic, even for his love for Catherine. It is
not love at first sight. In fact, for Samar it is the first love of adolescence, something natural for his age. The image of Catherine when Samar first met her, is firmly burnt in on his plastic imagination an image which is truly poetic – “......it is the picture of her sitting up very straight on the jute mat, abstractedly plucking at the tanpura strings, the light from the short flickering flame of the diyas bathing her clear unblemished face in a golden flow, that has stayed most vividly with me......”

Samar attributes his love for Catherine to his sense of loneliness in Benares and not to any romantic desire to taste the forbidden fruit. He states: “It explained the speed with which I grew to cherish the long evenings in Catherine’s house.”

When he would unwillingly come back from Catherine’s house he would find the things in his room in the same position in which he left them and would feel depressed: “It was as though I had expected them to have changed positions during my absence, that they hadn’t was proof of the loneliness and boredom I increasingly felt when in that room.”

Samar enjoys the company of Catherine, likes to see the beauty of Benares through her eyes when he is offered a trip to Mussoori, he first thought of money, whether he can afford the trip. Only when he finds that he will be travelling with Catherine, a woman alone, he feels excited. However, all his reactions are that of a young man excited to go into and yet fearing feminine mystique. When he finds
Catherine asleep on his shoulders on his bus journey, there is no romantic excitement but there is a full caring regard for her: “Careful not to disrupt her sleep, I sat stiffly on my seat, flinching each time the tyres hit a pothole and watched the orange glow of dawn fringe the towering snow-capped green hills of Mussoori.” In his Kalpi visit Samar is able to discover a close affinity between him and Catherine: “The sense of a life somehow not working out, a life whose true flowering had yet to come was familiar to me, and it was by this feeling suddenly renewed, that I felt myself deeply moved…” The intimate proximity of Samar with someone who seems a remote and unsettling stranger appears to be miraculous to him, real and unreal both. This is the moment of pure happiness, partly physical, partly mysterious. He is filled with a sense of wonder at the crystallization of his vague longings and expectations of childhood and adolescence into a sharp and clear feeling for Catherine. Yet Samar is assailed by doubts, fears, and sense of insecurity as well as a sense of guilt of having wronged Anand.

In Pondicherry while he is waiting for the letter from Catherine, he is thrown into the company of Priya, who develops an attachment towards him. Samar, however, is not able to get free from the influence of Catherine. He is purged of all illusions and tender feelings that he had cherished towards Catherine after he gets her second letter. His life in Dharmashala for seven years becomes a life with
unchanging routine in solitude having neither ambition nor love nor any of other preoccupations of his age. The feeling, that something good and precious is growing within him above the fear and pain of adulthood fades. He considers it to be a retreat like that of the old Brahmin idea: “I didn’t have the same self-doubts. I didn’t miss the old intensity of contradictory hopes and fears, the hopeful blind striving I knew in the days I came to live in Benares, which I often felt was leading me nowhere.”

Samar’s strivings to come to terms with his existence in a fast changing world cannot be termed as romantic but can be called modernistic or realistic. Even Miss West, Catherine, Mark, and others are not basically different from Samar. Their circumstances in life may be different, but their struggle to cope with the human condition is the same. All the characters are longing for fulfillment in a culture other than their own: Rajesh from a poor background of deprivations and suffering arrives in Benares to study and make some money, Samar finally comes to live in a big city and all the European Characters are looking for something special in India. Mark plans to go back to America, and says, “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 things in life.”
This book is of course also a sentimental education for Samar. It is a sensitive and introspective novel, but not sappy one. What is new about the novel is that it renders very faithfully the upheavals in the mind of a typical youth of the nineties of the previous century in a place not easily susceptible to change. It is a good reflection on the relationship between East and West and also an interesting journey through different parts of India.

It is sometimes difficult, as a reader, to know how seriously to take this romance. Readers do not have Catherine’s thoughts, but only her endearments, which come to her very easily, as if practiced. Only the effect of the romance on Samar can be seen; his feelings - even if misguided, or not truly reciprocated - are real. This inequality raises the question that resonates throughout *The Romantics*: If one is a “romantic”, how can the world within are brought into alignment with the world of others?

After his tryst with Catherine, Samar’s interest in all else dwindles. His disengagement shows especially in the novel’s uneven subplot, which attempts to document his friendship with Rajesh, an Indian student with obscure political connections. In fact, the narrative and its language falter whenever Samar attempts to describe India or Indians without the company of his Western friends. At these moments, Samar loses the romantic sensibility that he enjoys when witnessing his
country through their eyes. He can never be a Westerner, yet he cannot seem to become interested in India.

Living between the two worlds and unable to realize his dreams Samar’s “romanticism” verges on delusion. If, as he claims, the world’s richness has been revealed to him through Catherine’s love, how can he translate this revelation to his readers? The answer is this novel, where contradictions flourish and the descriptive power of the prose is intoxicating, controlled, and sure.

One of the very first things his father told Samar is that the world is Maya, an illusion. But it is a meaningless idea to a child, and the peculiar ordeals of adulthood take him even further away from true comprehension. Samar responds to his ordeals by following his father, and renouncing the active life - he leaves Benares to become a school teacher in a Himalayan village. Whether or not he has cast off his romanticism, or his attachment to Catherine, time passes nevertheless and cannot be turned back. He concludes his story by claiming to have achieved calmness, but this is difficult if not impossible, to believe.

Conclusion:

Given Mishra’s background at Allahabad University and living in small Himalayan towns, it appears that The Romantics is a memoirist expansion on a few years of Mishra’s life, which gives reason to forgive the excessive soul-searching
and overstated dissatisfaction that characterizes Samar’s approach to his surroundings.

The difficulty comes with the fact that the cast of the novel doesn’t really do much. They enter relationships, break out of them, travel, meet people, and that’s pretty much of it. The descriptions of Benares are beautifully written but, by the end of the novel, one can feel that Samar had lived a while and learned little, and there was minimal emotional growth on the part of any of the characters. Mishra here fears to develop the characters because of the autobiographical nature of the novel and perhaps he knew too well who they were and who they were going to become.

Though slightly over-long and crowded with minor players, the novel is an intriguing combination of casual grace and emotional intensity peppered with discrete social comment on caste, class, sectarian strife and state of the nation. Mishra’s evocations of Indian landscape and customs are vivid and thoughtful. His attention to detail is scrupulous and his portrait of provincial Indian life feels authentically crowded and gritty, but the emotional punch never arrives.
AMIT CHAUDHURI’S A NEW WORLD

Introduction:

Amit Chaudhuri was born in 1962 in Calcutta and grew up in Bombay. He has written numerous novels, short stories, poems and critical essays in English, but is best known for his book Freedom Song. He attended University College London, Balliol College Oxford, and has also been a writer-in-residence at Wolfsan College.

His novels have won several major awards and he has received international critical acclaim. He is also an acclaimed Indian classical musician. He is currently a creative writing tutor at the University of East Anglia. On March 18, 2008, he was included in the panel for the Man Booker International prize 2009. He received the Commonwealth Writers prize in 1991, Encore Award in 1994, Los Angeles Times Book prize in 2000 and Sahitya Akademi Award for A New World in 2002.

Plot:

A New World is the story of Jayojit Chatterjee, a divorced writer living in America and the visit he makes with his son Vikram to his elderly parents’ home in Calcutta. Jayojit is an economist, writer and university lecturer. He travels back from the United States to his native India with his son, Vikram known as Bonny.
They are to stay for four months to take advantage of the custody settlement following Jayojit’s divorce. As father and son re-establish themselves in the city during the summer, there is a sense of the returning migrants’ disorientation within a landscape that is both familiar yet strange. Behind him in America, is the broken relationship that has left Jayojit fragile and depressed, yet he can’t help glancing back at that land of wealth and opportunity as if it might also cure him.

The novel merely spans the visit of father and son to their native, Calcutta, beginning with Jayojit’s arrival in his old world and ending with his departure from it. The novel is almost completely uneventful or it is one that focuses on the small events of everyday life: eating, going to the bank, dealing with neighbors, servants, relatives, and acquaintances. Calcutta, indeed all of India, is no longer Jayojit’s world, and his relationship with his parents has also shifted both due to the distance and his divorce. He moves tentatively in these old and only semi-familiar places, uncertain of whether he is trying to recapture the old or move on to the new.

**Analysis:**

The novel opens with Jayojit’s coming back to Calcutta in April, the aftermath of the lawsuit and court proceedings in two countries still fresh. Jayojit was married to an Indian Woman Amala, but the marriage fell apart and Amala was awarded custody of the child. The divorce and the custody arrangements
continue to weigh on Jayojit; the voices echoing behind him. But he felt robust. He had gone so far as to challenge the custody arrangement under Indian law. The son is more than a trophy, and Jayojit seems a good enough father, but there is also a certain distance there. The boy understands but does not speak Bengali, as Jayojit and his wife both speak to each other in English, only one of the ways in which he is cast from the beginning in a role of vague observer rather than a participant. His son is called Bonny which was his pet name, given him by Jayojit’s mother, “a strange Western affectation from the old days, to call children names like these – though his mother was not westernized.”

Parents accept that offsprings who live abroad will appear to them in a slightly altered incarnation, and are even disappointed if they do not.

Jayojit was a big man, five feet eleven and fair-complexioned and still handsome in a bullish way. He wrote one successful book, and wants also to use the time in Calcutta to work on another book dealing with “the ethics of developmental policy”. He has his Apple laptop with him, but is unable to proceed. Indeed, he seems unable to accomplish much of anything beyond running little errands and going on a few small outings with his son. He fits comfortably in the parental household, itself a place of quiet and unambitious routine.

Jayojit’s father was a Rear-Admiral in the Indian navy and also has some difficulty adjusting to retirement and moving in a world where his rank no longer
impresses or is of much use. When he had been Admiral, stationed first in Cochin and then in Delhi, which had been a dream world because everything had been done for them; they had a huge bungalow wherever they went, a car with navy’s deep blue colour and two stars on the back. They had never thought of the value of money and even they had never thought the value of money would depreciate so rapidly after retirement. Admiral said, “if you were unemployed or had retired, it was better not to be in India but somewhere else. The institution, even the country, you had served did nothing for you; they gave you everything as long as you were working, but in old age you had to manage your life and your finances yourself.”

He had lived in different places in India while he was in service. His home was at different places; Vishakapatnam, with the sea lashing the harbour, known by that quaint name at the time Vizag, then Cochin; and Delhi in Chanakyapuri, not far from Mrs. Indira Gandhi. He has firm opinion about Mrs. Gandhi. He said, “Whatever you might think of her, she’s gutsy… The Russians respect her, the Americans fear her.” These words returning to him like the lines of a nursery rhyme. Even now he believed that “India had declined since ‘that woman’s death’.” Both father and son often and often discussed about the Indian politics and its economic conditions. When Mr. Chatterjee was made Rear-Admiral, he recalled Nehru nostalgically, as if he were somehow responsible for all the good in
people’s lives: “Met him, you know. Saluted him…was it sixty-six? Broken man, but handsome. No truth to what they said about him and Edwina.”

His heart condition and diabetes had made him slow, but was a big man too. The mild stroke he had had seven years ago might occur any day. There had been a fleeting fear of paralysis. The Admiral’s right arm, the old saluting arm, had been mildly affected. That is why he was cautious at the dining table also. The major savings of the Admiral goes for his doctors, medicines and the hospital. It is “the expensive business of keeping oneself alive.” His savings are mainly in government bonds. He has nothing in shares though he knows from the news papers “the share market is doing well……new companies coming in.” He does not know enough of the share markets and companies. So he hesitates in investing the money in them. His son though an economist, when sees his father’s hesitation about investing in shares, for which he has neither the means nor the confidence, has no advice to give him.

It was not easy to be intimate or relaxed with him. He was one of those men who, “after independence, had inherited the colonial’s authority and position, his club cuisine and table manners, his board meetings and discipline.” He was old fashioned; he rarely praised his wife. All along he had bullied his wife for not being as much a memsahib as he was a sahib. She had adored and feared him, and paled beside him. Jayojit’s mother takes care of the household, adapting to the
needs of the three males that occupy it for these months, playing the role of grandmother, mother, or wife as needed. She was not the best possible cook also. She had fixed ideas about what her son’s life in America was like. She had never been abroad; “it was an imaginary place for her, a territory that intersected with her life without ever actually touching it, and which had, for her, its own recognizable characteristics.” She was more careful about her grandson, and she even worried of Jayojit’s going out with Bonny in that hot sun of Calcutta. Bonny’s mother Amala, was more and more real in her separate everyday existence. Yet Bonny’s grandmother was too full of her own worry, her bosom working with affection.

The admiral had become strangely Bengali and native only before two things. The first was his in-laws; in those days when his wife and he quarreled, his wife crying softly, would pack her things and go away for a week to her parent’s house. He would be left dumbstruck, unable to say anything. The second was his grandson Bonny. He could not reconcile himself to the fact that the boy had to tag along part of the year with Jayojit and then go back to his mother, who was living elsewhere on the vast American map with someone else. “He could not comprehend the loneliness of the child, or why the loneliness needed to exist. Yet, in spite of this, and in spite of the fact that the old India had changed, and he himself had grown somewhat decrepit, the official air still hung around him, like a presentiment.” Since the divorce of Jayojit, the Admiral and his wife had
withdrawn into themselves and gone into a sort of mourning; their flat had become a shell and the neighbours’ flat in their imagination, had moved further away. There was one Mr. Ghosh, the man whom Jayojit had seen no more than a couple of times and his wife Pramila, had cordial relations with the Chatterjees. In all kinds of ways, these people were a million miles away from Jayojit’s parents and their world; “their ambitions were different, even the Bengali they spoke was different; they might have belonged to different countries. The lack of contact was also perhaps partly Jayojit’s family’s fault.”

And yet, during the great Durga Puja, Jayojit’s mother apparently met Mr. and Mrs. Ghosh downstairs at the festivities and exchanged meaningless small talk during the three-day-long ceremonies. Each year it provided a brief but vivid illusion of life beginning again. It is true that they were not socially compatible, that before the Admiral’s retirement their chances of meeting would have been remote, the Admiral with his command belonging to a different world altogether; but “this country had a way of, in the end, concealing disparity and banishing the past.”

Chaudhuri is at his best in describing the small scenes of daily life, and he draws a very vivid picture of the admiral. Many of the people, even those who don’t appear on the scene for example, Jayojit’s ex-wife a potential new one and his brother are well-evoked. For the Admiral and Mrs.Chatterjee, “the television was always on in the evening until a year; it did not matter if they were watching it
or not. Then, last year, during the second, prolonged custody battle, they’d neglected a couple of episodes....”126 The thought of his second son, Ranajit, disturbed the Admiral because he married four years ago and there was “no sign of children as yet; his daughter-in-law, Anita, was twenty-seven years old.”127 Admiral believed that they might have planned something.

Chaudhuri evokes feeling and mood, and there are nicely realized details from the observations about Biman Bangladesh Airlines and its passengers to the unreliable servants in the Chatterjee building, but Chaudhuri does not do quite enough with them. When Jayojit’s father asked him why he had chosen Biman Bangladesh Airlines, he answered with a chuckle that “the tickets are less expensive.”128 The truth is that there are a lot of airlines coming to Calcutta, all of them from third-rate East European countries like Rumanian, Yugoslav and Thai. He says “I couldn’t get seats. Air India – if I have to tolerate rudeness, I’d rather it wasn’t from air hostesses who’ve got their jobs because of some reservation quota. At least in Bangladesh Biman, which doesn’t follow a single international regulation and isn’t even a member of the IATA”.129

He does not draw fully on the riches of Calcutta. And too little happens. There is neither true action, nor - a possible alternative - does Jayojit come to terms with himself and his situation. There are perceptive observations. Jayojit had “begun to believe in the efficacy of prayer; of aloneness, which is what prayer
was”. But most of it reinforces the picture of Jayojit as an isolated individual, at best a sliver of the whole that he might be aware his family not itself fragmented. For two weeks he had done little but read newspapers, and “desired, in secret, to finish a book, until he sat before his laptop in the afternoon…….he browsed slowly through old files, his mind elsewhere. Every time he’d tried to return to, during the last two months, the project he was supposed to be working on, found himself to escape it….”

Jayojit is not entirely convincing as an economist either, or perhaps too convincing a representative of the dismal science. He knows more about economic theory than shrewd investment, about global trends and the third-world markets. He is lost in the abstract as to how the theories “intersected with something particular and real, like his father’s personal life and decision - that was different, and beyond the scope of his discipline”. This did not stop him from offering his advice to Rajiv Gandhi, suggesting how to go about economic reform. Someone has recommended him to the Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and he had sent him a plan, suggesting gradual liberalization. “In the new, as yet unfinished, brickwork of India’s new economic order”, he had laid an early and important cornerstone. Jayojit believed that nothing but economic reform could change India from a country living on borrowings from the West into a productive and competitive one. After some days in Calcutta, one morning Jayojit read an editorial in a damp
newspaper about how economic liberalization was urgently required, but how, too, if introduced without caution it might lead not only the loss of what was seen to be Indian culture, but to uncontrollable economic disparity. Jayojit had had a dream while in university about socialism and a just world order; but no longer; now the important questions are “whether there could be justice without economic well-being, whether, in a poor country, healthcare and literacy needed to be a prerequisite to deregulation, or whether deregulation would provide the economic wherewithal for literacy and healthcare.”

Jayojit even wondered if he should write the Statesman a letter stating, “one must begin by sounding a note of caution about assuming that economic deregulation will be a panacea to all our problems; but it will, no doubt, be one to some of them.”

Given how removed from almost all Indian reality - especially economic reality - he appears to be as he moves through the book this does not sound like it could have been a firm cornerstone. One might consider it to be an especially sly comment by the author on why India’s economy is still such a shambles - because of people such as Jayojit - but the author does not strike one as a writer with the sense of humour for such subtle, clever digs. When he was talking with Dr. Sen, he said that getting Nobel Prize is depended on the dominant political lobby of the time. He says, “It’s more politics than anything else. I mean also which school of thought exercises most power at the moment.” Then the doctor shook his head
brightened and said, “Yes, that is so, isn’t it? They didn’t give it to Gandhi but they give it to Kissinger!”¹³⁷ He said it indignantly as if he had been in the midst of those events.

Chaudhuri writes well, but again not well enough to carry such a story. And there are odd anachronisms. British-educated Chaudhuri chooses America as the exile for his Indians, but there is nothing in Jayojit’s speech that properly reflects this. Indeed, statements such as saying that Bonny was born in a nursing home will strike American readers as bizarre because in America, nursing homes are old-folks homes.

Sleep can be a refuge from intolerable anguish; but it is thin and vulnerable, restless and soon over. Humiliated when his wife leaves him for another man, partly bald moreover, and with bad breath, Jayojit takes leave of his life in California to spend the summer with his parents in Calcutta. Amit Chaudhuri portrays this retreat into childhood reassurance as a sleep of its own, briefly consoling and mournfully fragile.

Author of a trilogy of novellas that evoke the amiable languor and stagnant poisons of his native city, Chaudhuri employs both art and risk in this novel. Mirroring Jayojit’s somnolence, the story fades away at times; mirroring its sweetness the writing is lovely; mirroring the shards of painful memory that pierce
the lethargy nails through a fakir’s mattress, the languor of the summer narrative is interrupted by snippets of the year-round realities Jayojit has temporarily shed.

Jayojit works to give substance to the daily details of his Calcutta holiday, as if they, not his broken marriage and position as an economics professor, were his real life. He clings to them like a dream that fights awakening. With his young son, Bonny, whom he has managed to wrest from his ex-wife, Jayojit lands at the airport after an interminably circuitous flight on a Bangladeshi airline, chosen to save money. He feels light and floating, his burdens unshouldered. When the taxi driver overcharges him, he laughs as if the fare were play money.

Calcutta promises respite and cosseting. As soon as Jayojit and Bonny arrive sticky and tired, his mother offers to assemble a greasy breakfast. They lack the energy to touch it. Her cooking Chaudhuri writes, in one of many phrases that give wings to this purposely still story, “was safe and insipid, and had a tranquility about it.”

“Have a bath, then, you two,” offers the father a retired admiral. Bathing is nourishment in the steamy city.

The days pass, easy and torpid. Bonny, whose displaced-child docility the author suggests without ever mentioning it, plays with his set of plastic dinosaurs. Jayojit takes naps and baths, rambles through the neighbourhood, chats with the neighbours, does small errands.
Snapshots is too active word for Chaudhuri’s portraits of life in his family’s middle-class apartment compound. Old postcards are more like it: a dog barking, the slumberous watchman at the gate, the drivers hanging about the tea-stall outside, which catered with thick slices of bread and biscuits, the pavilion from where the building’s laundry where clothes from the building are ironed is delivered crisp each day. There were few things to rival washed clothes in their undisappointing recurrence.

At times nothing moves at all: not in Jayojit’s summer days, not in the pages of the book. It is a dead calm. Gradually it becomes trying for Jayojit, as he begins to out sleep himself. And from his restless rest, Chaudhuri assembles a moving portrait of ageing parents and a son whose troubles mark them, just as their decline marks him.

The apartment is decent but cramped. In the evenings the sound of television drifts from next door. “Ever since evening, the sound of television music and the voices of television characters had begun to come from the other flats, like a form of public dreaming. But when Jayojit turned on the air-conditioner, nothing could be heard but its hum”.140 His parents had come to this flat eight years ago, and he visited only three times since then. His own feelings towards the flat are thus partially ones of familiarity and trust, and partially a complex of other feelings such as of amusement and amazement at the mass-produced design, of both pity
and avuncular affection for its bathrooms, tiles, furniture, verandah, and a basic admiration for and acceptance of its reliability. His father or his mother could not see any of these things. So he too “could not see them separately from the flat they had made their own”.

Admiral Chattarjee is living as a pensioner whose value is shrinking and on investments too cautious to profit from the securities boom. Jayojit an economist of some small repute is an occasional consultant to the Indian government. He is helpless as economists tend to be, when his father shyly hints that he could use some financial advice.

Admiral Chatterjee speaks bluff naval English. He used to frequent the officer’s club; now diabetes and a small stroke have sapped his energy. More profoundly so has his loss of position, perks and deference. He schools himself to be simply one more old man to bank clerks and shop attendants. There is a fragile habit of command, still but puzzlement beneath it. He feels threatened by his wife’s quiet plea for a washing machine; they must do with the part-time help that is all they can afford. It is change he fears. As for Mrs. Chatterjee, change might be welcome perhaps in everything except deference to her husband. There was a difference between Jayojit’s parents with regard to appliances; “his father distrusted them as he would a rival; his mother had no confidence in using them, but none the less desired them. There was no doubt that a washing machine would
help; probably it was too expensive for them." In this regard his mother would say nothing. She would not argue with her husband. His father is of the opinion that it was easier and cheaper to have a maidservant than to buy a washing machine. Even though they are living in a consumer society, “it was difficult to negotiate with his father when he was in this dogmatic mood.” Jayojit’s holiday has a little while to go but it is over in fact. The date of departure had been arrived at random, but they needed to get back around then when it was still summer. Their India trip would have ended. Bonny should return to his mother in August. Even on holiday life intrudes. Jayojit will buy a washing machine for his mother; he has a purposeful though wonderfully indirect talk with the family doctor an old friend, about his father’s health.

The artfully, perhaps too artfully hidden thread that runs through Jayojit’s Calcutta is of course, what happened to his marriage. He married Amala eleven years and seven months ago precisely. That was when that evening pleasantness had set in, the month of Hemanta on the Bengali calendar. Three months after their wedding Amala had begun to write to mother-in-law from Arlington. The letters came with the name Mrs.Sumitra Chatterjee. They were determinedly chatty but formal, and full of questions. They had given a fleeting pleasure to Sumitra. Untill Bonny’s birth; he and Amala had been passionate and seemingly loving. Bonny had been born three years after the marriage. The first two years were the years of
amorous energy. Yet it had been absurd. He remembered how he and Amala had, when visiting India, “their visits home were regular and annual for the first three years”\textsuperscript{144} gone to Nainital in the second year of their marriage, to the wild life sanctuary, hoping to be amazed by the glimpse of some rare beast or the sight of a peacock dancing.

Both Amala and Jayojit had grown up with the same background, listened to the same music, and liked the Beatles. She predictably, shied away from the Rolling Stones as so many girls he used to know in school. He has clung to the loyalties he thought he was shaped by; she has seamlessly allowed herself to shed her early enthusiasms, which probably have not been very intense in the first place, and, “listening to the incomprehensible music of the eighties, would say, ‘What’s wrong with it?’ At first, he found this touching.”\textsuperscript{145} Both of them had decided, at some point in their lives, without articulating it to themselves, like a pact “they’d made with several others without knowing it, that an arranged marriage was the best option.”\textsuperscript{146} Everything was well with them until 1986. Two years after Bonny’s birth in Claremont, their love-making dried up, almost without their noticing it. “At first they joked about it……..Sometimes, when Bonny’d just learnt how to speak, they’d kiss each other, even in front of the boy. Then unfamiliarity set in, though no one else would notice it, and they got used to even that. The child instead of bringing them together, actually enabled them to separate into their own
spheres of desire and loneliness.” All along, whenever they quarrelled, they quarrelled with great precision in the English they had grown up with. What Jayojit judged most harshly was that Amala should get involved with her gynaecologist, a married man. He found Amala’s transformation impossible to understand or interpret; equally strange her claim, “He was kind to me.” He’d been with Amala himself to this doctor before Bonny’s birth; not an unpleasant looking man in his forties who was balding slightly, and surely not charismatic; a whiff of bad breath; difficult and almost impossible to imagine how any woman in her right mind could prefer him to Jayojit. It was all told by Jayojit himself to his father who in turn quietly quoted a proverb: “Of woman’s character and man’s fate even God is ignorant; what knowledge then can mortals have of these things?” They had been divorced at the end of the year before last in a bright, clean Midwestern summer. It was not an easy or even a civilized event. The court had ruled that Amala, who had taken the child with her, would have full custody. Jayojit’s first reaction was that all was lost.

Amala moved out, sued for divorce and got full custody of Bonny. It was difficult for Jayojit to wake at home in Claremont with Bonny gone. When Amala had left him and gone to California, he used to wonder at how this town, with its McDonald’s outlet guarding the highway at night like a lit oasis, had come to be so integrally a part of his life. “Some of the pictures she had bought – prints; pichwais
with serene trains of elephants, the cowherd-god, dallying with the gopis, identified by the peacock-plume above the forehead – are still on the walls. Mornings were quiet in Claremont.”¹⁵⁰ He lay still in his house feeling quite separate from the man who had written a book about economic development, who drove a Ford, who had secured tenure. Then he had decided to fight; “not just his studied determination but his natural belligerence had guided him.”¹⁵¹

Jayojit fired his lawyer. He employed a new lawyer; and said to the old one on the phone, “I’m sorry, Garry, but I have to think of other eventualities”,¹⁵² and brought an unusual action in an Indian court and won vacation rights. Chaudhuri feeds readers these things one scrap at a time, spaced between the Calcutta errands, naps and walks. Frustratingly, it never quite makes a full meal though it infuses tension into the stillness. It also represents perhaps over subtly, Jayojit’s own need to blot the story out for a while.

In fact, the real weight of the breakup is conveyed not in the brief grudging facts but in what it has done to Jayojit’s father and mother. Again the disclosures are scattered, but they are devastating. In a strange way, they felt abandoned. Overweight and failing, the admiral has begun to take conscientious morning walks. He doesn’t much want to live longer, but he felt this need to see Jayojit through. Most quiet and affecting is an aside about the parents’ television habits. They had been addicted to soap opera romances. Then, during Jayojit’s custody
battles they stopped watching. “They’d found they could no longer immerse themselves, or even find a center, however temporary, in a proxy existence.”¹⁵³

Jayojit chooses his mother a sari. It is off-white tangail with orange embroidery upon it, and a green border. He is attracted to it “not because it had stood out but because it had held back; there had been an understated quality about it that had caught his attention.”¹⁵⁴ This sari selection could serve to describe Amit Chaudhuri’s imagination. He prefers the details of life that ‘hold back’. He is intent on the innocent, the shy and the incidental.

Jayojit is in a savourless state. He cannot cope with the idea of a strong taste, a second wife. His brother Ranajit would like Jayojit to marry again. “Joy was thirty-seven; he wasn’t young any more. If he married now, the Admiral believed, it would be like attending to a wound when it was still fresh.”¹⁵⁵ Once he met Arundhati seven months ago. From then they met each other again and again. She respected him in her quiet way. He had felt that. He had begun to like her. “In spite of an ‘arranged marriage’ having failed once, they were both prepared to give it a second go; he still didn’t have confidence in ‘love’; it was other things – understanding, mutual needs – that held a marriage together.”¹⁵⁶ He is not willing to go for Hindu wedding. And she wants to go for “just a registry.”¹⁵⁷ Everything had been going smoothly. After a little more than a month, she had changed her
mind. And their marriage had not taken place. His father had already a vision of their second marriage.

There are points in the novel to be laughed at the extent to which Chaudhuri is resolved to show life in uncooperative mood. Romance is not on the horizon; even the unpleasant diversion of ill health does not arise. People lie in the lap of their lives, waiting to be rocked. At the end of one chapter, Bonny might have caught a fever, but the last line reads- “The boy had no temperature.” At the close of the novel, Jayojit finds himself making pleasant conversation with a young, unattached American woman on the plane home. But no new start is hinted at. He felt not the slightest attraction towards her, and was reassured to sense that she probably felt none towards him. If he thinks of the second marriage, it is not a bad idea.

**Conclusion:**

The novel is a gamble because it is quite astonishingly lacking in incident. The drama for Jayojit, Joy for short, is over before the book begins. He is a Bengali economist working in the American mid-west whose wife has left him for her gynaecologist. There has been a harrowing custody suit in two countries over their seven year old son Bonny, which has secured limited victory only for Joy. We first meet father and son in transit. Chaudhuri writes as if he were a curious fellow
traveller searching for clues, and he finds them everywhere. Bonny’s gait for instance, is a giveaway: he walks with the mournful, loping air of a miniature expeditioner. Very soon, the reader is moving in with the ageing Chatterjees and getting to know their flat; inspecting the lentils, the flesh bar of Lux soap, the fish heads - all the textures of life that persist no matter how gaping the holes in the emotional fabric. Home, for everyone in it, seems to be somewhere between a haven and limbo. Even the cooking participates in this: “Home food was safe and insipid and had a tranquility about it.”

The old newspaper also gets its appearance in the action of the novel. Some of the shelves in the house are covered with newspapers, Jayojit furrowed his eyebrows at them and snorted humorously: “Something about Marxism and liberalization: the paper couldn’t be very old. The hard-core Marxists and trade unions wanted to know how the Chief Minister would reconcile liberalization with Marxist beliefs; Basu had offered China as an example.”

His father also had a sneaking, unconfessed admiration for the Chief Minister because he had done his Bar-at-Law in England; he was a gentleman. Then in Bengali he said, “Meanwhile, look what’s happening to this city. You can’t walk on the pavement, can’t post a letter. In English again, seriously, I wouldn’t advise you to come back to it.”

One day Jayojit woke up at eight in the morning, it was hot and surprisingly silent. He read the newspaper twice, bored the first time, “with the writing and with life in India, and in a more interested way the
second time round; then he read an article about how well Indians were doing ‘abroad’; naturally, by ‘abroad’ the reporter meant not so much Kuwait or Bangladesh but principally America.”

There is charm in the novel, and it is convincing too. In Chaudhuri’s hands, life may be minor but it is never uninteresting. Life’s mundane and ordinary details are chronicled with eloquence. This book has none of the exclamatory playfulness of Rushdie, or the compendious narrative drive of Vikram Seth. If great social shifts occur in this fiction, they are heard from a tremendous distance and passing.
Notes

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