

CULTURAL CLASHES IN THE NOVEL OF PANKAJ MISHRA

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Pankaj Mishra, a name which is coined in the sphere of world literature, born at Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh, India, has reckoned himself among the writers who have glorified the cultural mood and milieu of India as well as throw light on the cultural confliction arises from the meeting of east with west. Before the publication of his novel “The Romantics” Pankaj Mishra is well known for Arundhati Roy’s “The God of Small Things”. Not for he wrote this novel but it was discovered by him when the writer of the novel sent her manuscript to Mishra. He made a contact with literary agents in United Kingdom. Finally, Roy’s novel took for publication and won even Booker prize in 1997. For she always presents her oblige to Pankaj Mishra. As far as the works of Pankaj Mishra is concerned, his books take the readers all across India, focusing in on small towns from the north to the south, east to the west. We encounter with the different kind of people belong to different country with different cultural aspect. When we come across with cultural variation, different cultural values and belief, it clashes. Differences in cultural values and belief place people at odds with one another. Belonging to different cultural and social milieu, a certain behavior coming from the cultural back ground does not match with those who expect action from the people of different behavioral. The character of Pankaj Mishra’s novel moves back and forth between east and west in the real life or in the dreams. To present cultural clash, we have focused the most appropriate work i.e. “The Romantics” for the purpose. Samar, the chief protagonist of the novel, stumbles upon a group of western, reveals exact cultural clashes. The story moves round about Samar, Miss West and Catherine, although other characters are also dealt but these three is the central figure in the novel. Samar comes to Benaras, the holy place of India as well as a religious and educational centre of India which has its historical importance, to enjoy the world literature especially Edmond Wilson who leaves his trace greatly on Samar. Benaras is associated with myths that shows spiritual foundation, offers an analysis of death, rebirth and immortality and answer to many questions related to the identity of human being and his relation to God, family and human society at large. Many writers like Raja Rao and Pankaj Mishra create the characters of their novel at Benares where it is easy to

contrast cultural confliction like east and west. That is not helpful for west but for east also to realize his lost cultural root. Like Raja Rao, Pankaj Mishra may also be called as a cultural ambassador who has made India real through his fictional art. Here he attracts towards the western culture as he sees western company. On the one hand, Samar represents the great culture of India whereas Miss West, Catherine, an impetuous Frenchwoman and their company stand for western culture.

The novel opens with arriving Samar, the protagonist, in Benares in 1989 to study civil service and immerse himself in literature of west like Schopenhauer, Turgenev and Edmund Wilson. There describes the Eastern rituals of Hindu gathering at Ganga river ghat performing different activities there, like the dead are brought to burn on ghat, coming of living in hopes of rebirth, the abode of lord Shiva, god of perpetual creation and destruction. Very soon he comes into contact with western company and meets Miss West and her company like Mark, Catherine, Anand, Debbie, etc. The first sign of cultural clash comes as the attraction of Samar towards western company. Samar subdues with the odd manner and discomfiting vacillation of Miss West from primness to Bohemian and he is drawn into her exotic circle.

"The perception that Miss West with her clean high forehead, hazel eyes, slender neck, and straight blond hair, now flecked with gray, had been at one time very beautiful came to me only later, when I was more accustomed to the physiognomies of white Europeans. Her presence in Benares, in a tiny room on the roof, where she appeared 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. It was a large judgment to make on someone I didn't know at all. But the impression -- seemingly confirmed by the serene melancholy she gave off as she sat on the roof, a Pashmina shawl draped around her shoulders, and gazed at the river for long hours -- this impression came out of the mood I lived with . . . as I lay huddled under multiple quilts in my chilly damp room, trying to read *The World as Will and Idea*."

Sometime in the novel, eastern living of standard is also appreciated by Catherine as she goes on her conversation with Samar. On saying Samar of living such simple like bourgeois and think like bohemian, Catherine replies-

"Really I would like to live as simple as possible in India. We can sleep on the floor; we can do without a fridge, washing machine..."

From the above statement by Catherine, on the first hand there some western who wants to live like Indian which represents his attraction towards eastern like eastern on the same time she also comments on backwardness of India, on the other hand the statement also represent the curiosity of Samar to know more about western.

From the beginning, when eastern is introduced to the western, they thought (as even mahatma Gandhi in his autobiography mentioned) and even today think eastern are ignorant. A kind of jealous and oppressive behavior toward eastern are traced. They always tried to underestimate that shows in the remarks made by Miss West-

"Miss West couldn't have guessed at the degree of uncertainty her remarks induced in me. They made me overturn all the notion I had formed so far. 'He's so American. So over sincere,' she had said. Were Americans over-sincere as a rule? Such generalizations lay beyond my limited knowledge of the world; they made me feel ignorant. And they

made Miss West herself seem a repository of bits and pieces of odd wisdom.”

The above statement is the part of narrator his own view and feeling in the guise of confliction that Miss West made Samar to think over. On the one hand Catherine believes in the way of living like Indian and even she imitates but on the other hand Miss West’s behavior and remarks compel the protagonist to think. Thus a kind of distraction towards western bears for a while in the mind of narrator and tries to console him.

There is two different world which have been depicted in a single world in Benares where little shrines of hanuman to the house of Pandit ji, who rents his house to the visitor to Benares, the scene at Ganga river, the abode of Shiva, god of perpetual creation and destruction are the representative of eastern world whereas the room gathered with western companion in evening celebrating their life at Miss West room, their way of living, discourse on the culture and living of their country in itself creates an imagination in the mind of reader as a western world. That small room containing few western companions is strong delineation of west in east. The word “party” is known to an eastern as unfamiliar that is also unknown almost for eastern society and they simply mean it as noisy, half naked revelers and moral laxity as statement comes out of the word of Samar as he is invited to join by Miss West-

“I was nineteen years old but hadn’t ever been to a party. The word itself brought to mind noisy, half naked revelers, it suggested the kind of empty frivolity and moral laxity of which I had been brought up to disapprove.”

The manner in which Miss West is organizing the party, the arrangement of every program like welcoming musician after dinner, arrangement of sweets going to shop, seems as if it is part of her daily life.

“I bought the welcoming garlands for the musicians who Miss West said, would perform after dinner, I went out to the bazaar and looked at the various kinds of Bengali sweets available and overcoming an innate aversion to...”

Although it is witnessed that west is totally opposite of eastern. What is prohibited in east is easy acceptable in west. And it is basic fact behind cultural clash and confliction. But despite all these, both attract toward each other and oppose also. Marriage and relation between two opposite sex are also a subject of confliction. Mr. Mishra has vividly brought about the confliction on the various stages. The scene when the author tells the relation and social understanding of Anand and Catherine, the above said terms is also tried to bring into light. Although they are living their relation accordance with western culture but as they live in India, they need to remain as the people live there.

“I can see now that for Catherine and Anand I had my role cut out. They were so self-contained and content when in each other’s company, but like all couples, they needed witnesses from the external world, and in this most tradition-minded of Indian cities, the presence of people like Miss West and myself were to them an important fact; it was a positive endorsement of their new fragile status as an unmarried couple.”

In the next scene, Shyam, who lived a neutered life aware of nothing except the wishes of his wife, shows the sign of discomfort with the way western life. He considers party as the useless and just waste of money and time. According to him it is just a trap where people come into grip in one of seven deadly sins i.e. greed. He used to impart his moral lesson to be away from to the guests who come to join party going up to roof by his Hindi proverbs:

“Greed is the biggest evil. It eats away man, destroys families, sunders son from parents, husband from wife...”

His proverbs always have two aspects; firstly it contains moral suggestion and secondly dissuades one from to be part of western culture and society which represents his character as an eastern devotee as he makes comment on going guest to join the party.

Another scene in which Samar is on roof disappointed about Catherine leaving to Bihar and he is informed that Catherine left Benares just because the parents of Anand is not happy with relation of Anand and will not accept a western girl to be part of their home. The scene represents a strong rejection for western as it is rejected Catherine for the choice of his son. In fact people want to be in company with western but do not want to make them the part of east.

“Did I tell you about Catherine’s visit to Bihar?’ she said. They were hard on her, scowling and suspicious: they didn’t say anything to her- they hardly speak a word of English – Anand got all the flake. Poor girl, she was in tears. But that’s something she’ll have to live with. You can’t expect people like Anand’s parents to change: they’ll always disapprove of her, and in some sense that disapproval is important to them. It’s part of their identity; they can’t let go of it.”

It is generally the dominant nature of male Indian that he always wants to see his opposite gender as she remained traditionally in the service of her husband. He always expects from her that she should always in the service of her husband like she must have idea of making delicious food. In short the writer has tendency to depict the treatment of Indian male towards his opposite gender i.e. dominant tendency, where as western opposes it always. According to western, both male and female have equal responsibility and duty towards each other. The same tendency has been also portrayed through the character of this novel. The conversation made between Anand and Miss West makes the above sense clear on the occasion of party organized by Miss West:

“Are you treating Catherine well?’ Miss West asked him, and he replied in a tone of mock complaint and with a heavy Indian accent: ‘But, Miss West, she must learn to cook.’ And Miss West, still bantering, said, ‘you sexist Indian men, you never change, do you?’”

When two cultures meet strangeness must arise from a side. One must feel inconvenient having with the people of different culture. It is not necessary that the people of only particular culture behave and feel like this. In fact it is a cultural gap which does not let allow them to merge into another cultural atmosphere. Every country has different living of standard, the way of celebrating joy and entertainment mean. And these things are generally responsible for cultural clash. Samar, the protagonist of the novel, is seen from the opening to the end of the chapter having felt strangeness, sometime talking with Miss West and sometime remaining alone in the absence of Miss West. Although it is, in fact, human nature but when the culture is familiar, it does not make one feel strange. This trait can be felt from the following text:

“All around me, people continuously spoke, laughed, ate, drank; and watching them, I became increasingly aware of the strangeness the occasion held for me.”

As a cultural committed writer, Mishra is essentially an artist in true sense of the word. Mr. Mishra has dealt various cultures of different countries. He has enlivened his fictional world through his characters. The presentation of every cultural element in the novel of Pankaj Mishra proves him an acute observer of culture. His characters mostly belong to different cultural background. And it is, really, a very tough task to present every term and activity belonging to culture so beautifully and vividly which itself proves his artistic capabilities. His portrayals are sharp and penetrating. The scene at the bank of Ganga river creates a clear picture of what we

usually see gathering at the river. The way as he has drawn is, really, a representative of Indian culture:

“Then the mist lifted and a succession of cloudless day followed. The river gleamed and glistened in the mid afternoon sun. Bright red and yellow kites hung high in the clean blue sky. Children appeared on the bathing Ghats; the uneven cobblestone steps came to be chalk marked with hopscotch rectangles; scrawny drug pushers lurked on temple porches where chess players sat hunched over tattered cardboard; pilgrims dressed and undressed all day long in a slowly turning Kaneevaram silk saris, the visitors from Rajasthan unwinding the spools of yellow and crimson turbans, the widows from Bengal in their austere white cotton. In the evening, the funeral pyres in the distant north of the city were like glow-worms in the gathering dusk.”

The above portrayal of the scene near the bank of Ganga river and the people from different states and their clothes i.e. the introducer of the culture from where they belong, are really a good representative of the writer as an acute observer of culture and cultural activities. Despite of all this the same talent is to be found in the portrayal of western culture that we see when the narrator first time describe western company coming to attain party and one by one tells about the physical appearance and their specialty of them. The following drawing signs:

“On that first sighting, Mark’s craggy, broad-shouldered handsomeness, enveloped in a long Pathan suit, seemed to match perfectly the years of hard experience his biography hinted at. He was accompanied by two women. One of them – with close-cropped hair and glasses on her round, plump-checked face – was called Sarah.”

The same thing is also noticed describing other western character:

“Miss west who wore an expensive – looking chocolate-brown dress of some soft shiny material... he was accompanied by two women. One of them –with close cropped hair and glasses on her round, plump- cheeked faced- was called Sarah... the other woman accompanying Mark was his girlfriend, a snub-nosed woman called Debbie. Short and squat, she looked a diminish figure beside the tall and sturdy Mark.”

The writer, who joins the story playing role of Samar, has created many different worlds in his narrative world. He stands with eastern and tries to bring about the integrity of Indian although it has been also criticized the vices existing at Benares but eventually, is found to be against western. He has strong influence of west as he is reading western writer like Schopenhauer, Turgenev and Edmund Wilson. These writers have fascinated Samar totally towards west. There are also other works of Pankaj Mishra in which he has dealt western theme like Temptation of West How to be Modern in India and Beyond, The Romantics, and Butter Chicken in Ludhiana. He has acquired capabilities of delineation of western influence on almost all the eastern countries. And he also has succeeded in his purpose skillfully.

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