

ALIENATION OF INTELLECTUALS IN UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE'S *ENGLISH, AUGUST*



English

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ABSTRACT

Alienation is an all-pervasive phenomenon in the modern society. Despite the material comforts and the technological advancements, man fails to perceive the purpose and relevance of his existence. The modern man feels rootless and finds himself entangled in the tragic mess. Alienated protagonists are recurrent in the modern literature and Indian fiction in English is no exception. Authors like R.K.Narayan, Raja Rao, Kamala Markandaya, Balachandran Rajan, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Arun Joshi and Kiran Desai have presented the plight of the alienated individuals. Similarly, alienation has become a major thematic concern with Upamanyu Chatterjee. Chatterjee very effectively delineates the alienation of intellectuals in his debut novel *English, August*. Through the characters of Agastya and other Western-Oriented intellectuals, the author deals with cultural problems of the modern India.

Introduction

Upamanyu Chatterjee who currently serves as Joint Secretary to Government of India on the Petroleum and Natural Gas Regulatory Board was born in 1959 at Patna. He has written a few short stories like "The Assassination of Indira Gandhi" before the publication of the trend-setting novel *English, August*. Upamanyu Chatterjee is an uncompromising realist. The protagonists in the novels of Chatterjee are alienated intellectuals. They are alienated because of the Westernized education imparted to them which has resulted in the conflict between the Western influence and the traditional roots. His novels show how urban educated people get divorced from society and its institutions like marriage and family.

Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August* was published in 1988. "Most novels progress, but this one simply chronicles an ongoing anomie and spiritual restlessness", writes Michael Dirda in his review in *The Washington Post*. This maiden novel of Chatterjee traces the purposeless journey of the protagonist in the modern spiritual wasteland. Soon after its publication it has attained cult status among the metro-bred youngsters.

The novel *English, August* portrays one year in the life of a trainee Civil Servant Agastya Sen, nicknamed August, posted at Madna, a small dot in the vast Indian hinterland known to be the hottest place in India. Agastya Sen is the representative of the contemporary urban youth of the megapolitans. Born and bred in metros, the 24-year old protagonist feels dislocated when he is posted in a far-flung place in Central India. He is born of elite parents and is used to the English ways of living. So he is nicknamed English by his friends. He is named after an ancient Hindu saint by his parents. But ironically he is so Westernized that he is called August and sometimes English and Ogu by his friends. Thus the name itself indicates the dichotomy in the personality of Agastya Sen. Agastya Sen cannot identify with his name like Gogol in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. Gogol at least makes an attempt to transform himself to Nikhil, but Agastya's inaction and absurd attitude towards life prevent him from doing so. His uncle Pultukaku comments rightly, "You are an absurd combination, a boarding-school-English-literature education and an obscure name from Hindu myth." (129) While Agastya of the Hindu mythology could push the mountain back, Agastya of the modern days with his hyphenated identity as Agastya and August struggles to find sense of life.

The protagonist is the Anglicized "superior person" who doesn't fit into the "real India and does not care about its problems. Agastya feels English ways and life style superior to native Indian ways. He can connect more with the US than the countryside of India. He is out of place in a rural area like Madna and the posting comes as a severe cultural shock to Agastya as the rural India is in sharp contrast with his urbane dreams.

On his very first day in the Collector's Office he is filled with a sense of unreal. He confesses, "I don't look like a bureaucrat, what am I doing here. I should have been a photographer, or a maker of Ad films, something like that, shallow and urban." (13) He feels like a fish out of water and wonders, "Is it because it is a new place? Yes. So, do I miss the urban life? Yes. Is it because it is a new job? Yes. The job is both bewildering and boring." (27) His sense of dislocation is aggravated by his lack of interest in administration. The 24-year old protagonist leads life aimlessly in the wretched guest house in Madna. He comes to Madna with marijuana, his habit of masturbation and Marcus Aurelius. He makes no effort to know the intrigues of the world of administration.

Through the character of Agastya, the author deals with cultural problems of the modern India. The existential crisis of the protagonist can be linked to his origins. He is born in a privileged family with the proverbial 'silver spoon in mouth'. He is half-Bengali and half-Christian as his father is a Bengali Hindu and his mother who dies when he is three years old is a catholic from Goa. Agastya is discontent with his Indian origins "... he wished he had been Anglo-Indian, that he had Keith or Alan for a name, that he spoke English with their accent." (2) A reviewer of *English, August* in *The Metropolitan* notes, "Could there be a better example of modern day urban Indian youth than 'Ogu' Sen? Morally crippled, culturally uninformed, civilisationally wretched. That's a whole generation of Indians for you. Blindfolds on eyes, plugs in the ears. Truly a generation unique in its self imposed darkness."

Agastya's alienation can be attributed to the westernized education he has exposed to. Being a member of an advantaged family, he has studied at the prestigious Boarding school at Darjeeling. This keeps him away from the familial emotions and bonds and makes him apathetic to the suffering of the masses and rather insensitive. The Western education system introduced by the British for producing intellectuals with colonial mindset is unfortunately being followed even today in the country. It encourages young ones to strive for individual happiness instead of collective happiness. It doesn't inculcate virtue and righteousness into the young minds. It still serves the purpose of forming a class of clerks, "Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, opinion, words and intellect." Rather than preparing students for society, it alienates them from it. Thus, For Agastya, Civil Service is just a career option and he is not really concerned about 'Service' either to the people or to the nation. Thus his sense of alienation not only makes him suffer, but also the entire community he is supposed to serve. He can show neither empathy nor sympathy towards the common people of Madna. He fails to develop a rapport with his colleagues as well. His friend Dhruvo precisely anticipates the plight of Agastya in Madna by saying, "I have a feeling, August, you're going to get hazaar fucked in Madna." (1) He adds, "Out there in Madna quite a few people are going to ask you what you're doing in the Administrative Service. Because you don't

look the role.” (3)

Along with the protagonist the other young characters especially from the 'elite, who are the products of the colonial mode of education also equally suffer from alienation. Dhruvo, Neeru and Renu experience absurdity of life and are caught in the web of existential dilemma in spite of their lucrative careers. For instance, Renu, Dhruvo's girlfriend who stays at Illinois feels a sense of dislocation. She writes from Illinois, "I really wonder what I'm doing here, especially because academically this place really 'sucks.'" (156) They do not feel at home either in their homeland or a foreign land. The 'cola generation' who are smart earning bucks and enjoying material comforts cannot reconcile with life.

Agastya's emotional barrenness is reflected in his attitude towards women. He has no emotional bond with his mother as she has died of meningitis when he is three years old. He thinks of all women as objects of pleasure. When Shankar inquires what he wants the most, he tells himself that he wants to fuck the mother of his best friend Dhruvo. The education does not give them morals required of a decent citizen and thus Agastya and his friends view their English teacher amorously. Agastya's girl friend Neera is thought of as "darling bitch". (287) His relations with the women are devoid of love and filled with lust. He can only feel lust towards the tribal woman who comes to him for help and finds her large cracked feet and veined forearms alluring. He gets an erection when a rural woman comes with a problem. His mind dominated by drugs and sex has little compassion for others and makes him quite oblivious of his responsibilities. His obsession with sex and exercise helps him to escape from the identity crisis. The author observes, "His exercise was something he felt he must hold on to, some anchor of stability, without it the day would slip into anarchy." (120)

Agastya Sen, an educated Bengali influenced by American culture can be considered an anti-hero. "There were so many people who thought Agastya Sen is this sweet, lovable character," Upamanyu says in an interview given to Vijay Nambisan. "He's nothing of the sort. He's a morally loose man in a morally loose world." Though he has talent to enter the most coveted job of the nation, he is confused and uncertain about life and ultimately becomes sick of life. His tragedy lies in his inability to act. He is upset by the inefficient and corrupt practices of Indian Administration, but never tries to do anything to address those ills. Agastya lacks that conviction to be proactive and he simply passes the buck to the system. He tries to escape the meetings he must attend by feigning illness. He is powerless and his power lies only in day-dreaming. His nagging doubt of self-worth results in the wastage of his intelligence and talents

Sen who is born and brought up in metros does not fit into his new milieu of the backwater town. The train journey through the hinterland, the drab town and the crumbling guest house heighten his angst and restlessness. "He realized obscurely that he was to lead three lives in Madna, the official with its social concomitance, the unofficial, which included boozing with Shankar and Sathe, and later, with Bhatia, and the secret, in the universe of his room, which encompassed jogging by moonlight." (48) He confesses this through a letter "I just can't get used to the job and the place. I'm wasting my time here, and not enjoying the wasting. That can be a sickening feeling." (131) Constantly preoccupied with his absurd thoughts, he dodges work. The lack of seriousness towards the job can be observed when he thinks that the *Madna District Gazetteer* can be used as a paperweight and for placing candles on.

Agastya represents the plight of Indian intellectual in the age of galloping modernisation. "Agastya was enraged at himself, for agreeing to the afternoon, for being in Madna, for a job that compelled him to be polite to Srivastav and his wife, for being in the job he was, for not having planned his life with intelligence, for having dared to believe that he was adaptable enough to any job and circumstance, for not knowing how to change either, for wasting a life." (112) He does not find life inspiring and keeps on complaining,

but does not strive for change. For him life is a disorienting experience, which is a common syndrome among many young Indians. Agastya's father confesses that he has done wrong by putting Agastya in a boarding school. He agrees with Pultu's opinion that a boy should always grow at home.

The existential crisis makes Agastya Sen behave like an alien and transforms him into a pathological liar. He lies about his personal details like marriage and his parents. He says that he is twenty-eight years old while he is only twenty-four. She lies that he is married twice and his wife has been to England for a cancer operation. He tells a hooligan that he climbed Everest. He only confides in his uncle and tells him, "I'm not very happy in Madna. I can't settle down to the job.... I don't want challenges or responsibility or anything, all I want is to be happy." (148) He toys with the idea of changing career very often, but remains indecisive. Agastya is discouraged by both Tonic and Pultukaku to give up the most coveted position in India and he decides to go back to Madna and get used to things. He goes to Jompanna as the Block Development Officer with a vague hope that things will be better. He tries to focus on his responsibilities, but the only time he shows a sense of responsibility is when he visits the tribal area of Chipanthi. But this lasts only for a brief period and very soon he is lost in his own world of illusions and fantasies. He feels "things moved even more slowly in Jompanna than in Madna." (252) He can bring half his mind to the work. Thus he loses the opportunity to serve the people.

Though the novel centres on Agastya's psychology, Upamanyu Chatterjee tries to underscore the torment faced by a generation of civil servants trapped between tradition and modernity. His first-hand experience of the Indian Civil Services helps him give an authentic account. Jaya Chakarvorty observes, "Chatterjee is familiar with the world he writes about. His insight into human nature coupled with his talent for humour, pathos and a gentle irony has won him great acclaim." (237) Srivastav, the Collector of Madna, Kumar, the Superintendent of Madna, Madan Bhatia, an old acquaintance and a forest officer and Shankar, an engineer are equally disillusioned. Srivastav is egocentric and self-centred who ill-treats his servants and people. Kumar is obsessed with porn films while Shankar is an alcoholic. All these people are intellectuals who have encountered heavy competition to join the elite government service, but cannot avail themselves of the opportunity to serve the people and the nation. Before joining the service they have seen the rural India a number of times through train windows, but never have experienced it. Even after posting, they see their region through the city boy-eyes. They are unsure of their aims and purpose of life and have preferred the civil services just for comforts they offer.

Conclusion

Upamanyu Chatterjee captures the alienation and existential crisis suffered by the Indian intellectuals in his maiden novel *English*, August. It draws heavily on the author's own experiences as a civil servant. "Agastya's confusion is superficially about his career: having followed his father into government service, he toys repeatedly with the idea of seeking other work. But his real problem stems from uncertainty about his identity in a rapidly changing nation. Chatterjee's central character has a satisfyingly complicated-even irreverent-takes on the concept of Indianness," Akash Kapoor observes in the review of the novel in *The New York Times*. He fails to work for the dynamic transformation of the society, as he lacks the vision, commitment and zeal to serve and is devoid of problem-solving abilities. With the lack of self-importance, he completely neglects his responsibilities and thus his alienation not only harms him, but it adversely affects the lives of the people who he is supposed to serve.

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