

CULTURAL ALIENATION, CRISIS OF IDENTITY AND SEARCH FOR ROOTS IN UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE'S *ENGLISH, AUGUST*.

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Abstract

Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August* exhibits the paradoxical existence of an individual who lives in a society coming under the new impact of globalization. It also portrays how the shadow of colonial past looms large over the lives of people in a country where rural-urban divide becomes glaring when Agastya Sen, an IAS, born and brought up in the metropolitan cities such as Delhi and Calcutta, starts living in the hinterland of India. His sense of alienation in his own country owes a great deal to his schooling and nurturing under the influence of the Western culture. It results in a crisis of identity which can never be defined by one or two sets of values. His attitude to language, religion and culture is ambivalent and most of the times sneering. Probably, hybridity best defines an Indian way of life and the seeker of an identity meanders in the maze of multicultural, multilingual and multiethnic dimensions of the country.

Keywords- Existence, Identity, Culture, Alienation, Colonialism.

Upamanyu Chatterjee's "English, August," was first published in India in 1988. The story of a young civil servant posted to a fictional rural town, it was hailed as the country's "Catcher in the Rye" — a novel that captured the zeitgeist of the 1980's, when India was uncertainly emerging from decades of economic isolation and ill-conceived socialism. Some of his descriptions are reminiscent of the late R. K. Narayan, whose fiction took place in the invented rural town of Malgudi. Indeed, what's striking — and wonderful — about Chatterjee's protagonist, Agastya Sen, is his aimlessness, his refusal to be pinned down to any particular opinion or grand idea. Agastya, an urban Bengali who seamlessly shuttles between Ella Fitzgerald and Rabindra Sangeet, joins the Indian Administrative Service and gets posted in the lap of India's hinterland - a dingy little town called Madna.

The novel journeys Agastya's, sense of dislocation as he meanders around a district collector (his boss) and his sweaty sensuous wife, corrupt but amicable policemen, earthy neighbours, a despicable guest-house caretaker with a shawl of identical kids, a cartoonist and a distant college friend who becomes his closest partner in crime. While the administrative service

offers August a brief and intense insight into the (un)workings of the great government machinery, the solitude and loneliness of being an intellectual island in a sea of foreigners compels him to take refuge in soft drugs and perverse hallucinations. Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August* is about the inherent impatience and isolation of the new generation youth, immensely influenced by the Western culture, set against the placid permanence of the traditional India. This confusion no doubt has something to do with the copious quantities of marijuana and alcohol Agastya consumes, but it also signals a welcome lack of self-importance.

It is an intriguing story of a young man's fumbling attempts to find himself and his place in the world. 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. Ending up in the remote town of Madna, Agastya (who has spent most of his life in New Delhi and Calcutta) quickly learns how foreign he is to the Indian heartland.

Like a tourist, he boils his water; he's terrified of the frogs and mosquitoes; he struggles with the local language. Even the novel's title hints at Agastya's ambiguous identity: named after a mythological saint, he is nonetheless so westernized that people have taken to calling him August, or just plain English. In this article I am going to emphasize the sense of cultural alienation and struggle to come to terms with one's identity which is eclipsed by rural-urban Indian division.

Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August* has been claimed by its subtitle as an Indian story, but after reading the novel one is compelled to ask how much Indian is this Indian story? In this context I am reminded of the concluding paragraph of Said's *Culture and Imperialism*. Said says:

No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are no more than starting- points which, if followed into actual experience for only a moment, are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of culture and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively white or black or Western or Oriental (408).

He further asks this rhetorical question: "Who in India or Algeria today can confidently separate out the British or French component of the past from present actualities and the vice-versa?" (15).

I felt exactly the same while reading the novel. It was as much creating an impression of the bequest of the Raj as much the image of India, both rural and urban at the threshold of modernisation and globalization. The tribal Madna has yielded place to an Industrial Madna with rich stores of coal, mica, limestone, oil and the prospect of having TV sets very soon. But at the same time the impoverished Madna with poverty, illiteracy, and poor sanitation testifies to the drain of wealth that India has been subjected to by the British rule. This very ambivalence pervades Agastya's personal (secret life within four walls), unofficial (life with Sathe the cartoonist) and official (Life as an IAS with Mr Srivastava and Mr Kumar) life. The sense of alienation that haunts him constantly is an off shoot of this historical and cultural phenomenon.

Chatterjee's protagonist Agastya whom Kumar calls an 'English type' is the by product of Macaulay's education policy which has been internalized by Indians very evidently. Agastya is an Indian by the color of his skin but an English man by his education and upbringing. The images of the Administrative services, the Railways and the English language as it has been Indianized by the Indians strongly assert the presence of the Empire in India. The constant description of the old, dilapidated yet symbolically most powerful buildings of the collectorate exhibits the perpetuation of the colonial structures as well as mindsets.

Needless to reassert what Gauri Viswanathan has brilliantly exposed that the English language and literature, the Railways and the IAS were the masks of conquest for the White rulers of India. In this context Gauri Vishwanathan remarks, "The English education was introduced in India with an object to achieve and maintain political domination, through cultural hegemony, by discreetly introducing Western values and perceptions among the natives and moulding them as subjects" (*Masks of Conquest...*18). Agastya is the by-product of this historical conquest. Upamanyu Chatterjee shows remarkable interest in mongrelized nature of language. Agastya reflects:

'Amazing mix, the English we speak. Hazaar fucked. Urdu and American,' Agastya laughed, 'a thousand fucked, really fucked. I'm sure nowhere else could languages be mixed and spoken with such ease.' The slurred sounds of the comfortable tiredness of intoxication,' "You look hazaar fucked, Marmaduke dear." (*English, August 1*)

Dhrubo rejoins by saying "...And our accents are Indian, but we prefer August to Agastya. When I say our accents, I, of course, exclude yours, which is unique in its fucked mongrelness ..." (1). Further Agastya's longing for foreign culture is also manifest in his desire to be like Anglo - Indian boys in his school days. "You are an absurd combination," Agastya's uncle remonstrates (and we can see why), "a boarding-school-English-literature education and an

obscure name from Hindu myth" (129). Agastya's teacher Dr Upadhyay is very suspicious of the relevance of teaching *Macbeth* or *Hamlet* to Indian students. He concludes that English in India is burlesque, still for some inexplicable reasons it is seriously necessary, no matter how funnily you acquire it.

Despite these English overtones there is something typically Indian about it. Indianness is to be found in the very Indian way of life. The author writes an assured English, and frequently cluttered with frequent references and additions from *Hinglish*, a tongue spoken by most people from the northern part of the country. Agastya, as a person is the perfect mirror image of several Indians who are in the same dilemma, or similar kinds of disillusionment. Smoking pot, mostly against his will, is an activity which is done actively but frequently not enjoyed, as is listening to the alien sounds of Keith Jarrett or the imagined sweetness of Tagore.

In India one cannot, however introduce oneself merely by revealing one's name: one must categorise oneself further. Is he married or not? This question is thrown at him repeatedly, although "all references to wives" are, Agastya notes, "in hushed, almost embarrassed tones. The humor in the book ranges from the comical to the stupid, from the farcical to satire, but rarely does any of the humor come across as forced. And in all the humor, Chatterjee manages to take a dig at an enormous variety of Indian mindsets and vices. Just for example his take on marriages or religion. For instance, in a temple of lord Shiva at khajuraho Agastya is compelled to draw a parallel between sexuality and religion and observes this:

There was a tube-light in the inner sanctum directly above the black stone phallus of Shiv. There the wives came into their own. They took turns to gently smear the shivling with sandal-wood paste, sprinkle water and flowers over it, prostrate and pray before it, suffocate it with incense, kiss their fingers after touching it. Agastya found the scene extraordinarily kinky.... But Agastya was not conscious of any blasphemy. Religion was with him a remote concern, and with his father it had never descended from the metaphysical (28).

Each and every view of Chatterjee comes across as a confused thought in Agastya's mind, and yet is a very perceptive observation on a fallacy, an event or just a tradition. In this context it is pertinent to quote Shashi Tharoor, "Colonialism misappropriated and reshaped the ways in which a subject people saw its history and even its cultural self-definition" (*An Era of Darkness*, 233).

Agastya's sense of alienation and uprootedness can also be understood in terms of a universal existential crisis and hollowness one feels in one's life frequently. In the *Myth of Sisyphus* Albert Camus asserts, "In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile....This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity" (3). The abysmal living conditions unsettle him. And with his habit of smoking marijuana and being stoned most of the time, Agastya finds himself in a perpetual state of daze, even as he listlessly goes about with his job. He's struck by the laidback attitude of the administrative community, trying to battle with the trying conditions of the place.

The collector -Mr Srivastav leading a relatively lavish lifestyle - keeps the social scene quite vibrant. Work takes a back seat for everyone and Agastya, caught in lethargy and inertia, is happy to get away with doing little or nothing. Most of the time his head is spinning, as he wonders what a guy like him could be doing in a place like Madna. But such is the heaviness he feels all round him, that he cannot gather the will to pull himself together. It's a vicious circle and the author brilliantly and skillfully describes page after page Agastya's growing sense of boredom, frustration and farcical existence. He reflects:

God, he was fucked – weak, feverish, aching, in a claustrophobic room, being ravaged by mosquitoes, with no electricity, with no sleep, in a place he disliked, totally alone, with a job that didn't interest him, in murderous weather, and now feeling madly sexually aroused. His stomach contracted with his laughter. He wanted to rebel. He said loudly, 'I'm going to get well, shave my head, put on a jock strap and jog my way out of here' (93).

It's really one person's account as he goes by his life aimlessly, but Upamanyu Chatterjee infuses his story with such varied and colourful episodes, dots it with so many nuanced characters, creates such a perfect sense of the place, that you are effortlessly drawn into a narrative that stays vibrant in spite of the essential static life of Agastya. And all this is recounted with a brazen sense of abandon and wry humour that it makes you chuckle and smile.

More admirably, the author brings a rare emotional nakedness and searing honesty to his protagonist's internal monologues and observations as one can find in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist As A Young Man*. There are several brilliant passages that bare the

protagonist's inner most feelings but I continued to be amazed by Upamanyu Chatterjee's power of perception and his ability to wrench out those thoughts so well.

Agastya's sense of alienation deepens not finding a reasonable answer to the question as to who he is. He lacks a definite sense of identity which comes from being rooted in one's culture. The notion of dislocation and identity are interconnected. Every human subject is necessarily "encultured" and an identity is constituted out of cultural experience. Agastya has no doubt that he is an Indian, a Bengali. But he is distanced from his native culture and tradition, from ties that bind family, friends, history, and myths of the land.

Brought up by surrogate parents in the absence of a mother, educated in a boarding school in Darjeeling when he paid occasional visits to his father, Agastya does not develop very strong family bonds. Agastya Sen represents in English, *August: An Indian Story* as trying to share and acquire the trappings of the new culture of global cosmopolitanism. The core of this cosmopolitanism prescribed that ultimately every society would have to be self-critical and re-examine what has to be retained from its traditions and what has to be jettisoned. Ashis Nandy is quite relevant here:

This self-examination, of course, was conducted not from the point of view of traditions or, for that matter, from 'culture-free' or 'culture-fair' vantage grounds (as psychologists define the theoretical posture). In practice, it meant nothing more than waging an uncompromising battle against anything that went against the newly internalised now-clichéd vision of a desirable society that emerged directly out of the European Enlightenment. (*A Life in Dissent* 42)

As a BDO in Jompanna, Agastya learns certain unpalatable truths about development, about the pathetic condition of the tribals and about that fact that even tribals can hit back when goaded past endurance, the way they cut off Mohan's (Assistant conservator of forests) hands who tries to rape a tribal woman.

Agastya considers himself inhabiting an alien land among strangers. Moreover he feels quite comfortable with only those characters, like Dhruvo his friend, Sathe, the Cartoonist, Shankar, the Engineer who also exhibits certain percentage of his views and attitude towards their life in Madna. Agastya is attracted to Shankar who is dedicated to thumri music and Sathe to his cartoons.

Both despite, having no pretensions to elitism have attempted to evolve a modern Indian imagination. Chatterjee even sees in these debauched artists a proto-type for a modern Indian culture, a synthesis of all the fractured parts of the Indian sensibility, the orthodox past, the colonial experience and the modern post-independent India. And above all they

consider themselves in the quest for self-identify and under the influence of cultural conflict. But on account of the extreme compulsion of his father, Agastya tries to pass his hard days with extreme tolerance but earnestly looks forward for a transfer to a better place which is the only means by which he could reduce his alienated feeling and his disgusting attitude towards life and work.

The novel ends on a note of confusion in Madna's contribution to the moulding of the protagonist's character. If Madna the sordid, backward place has not been able to give him anything positive, it has at least been able to arouse him out of his smug complacency and make him see there is another world than the one young man like Agastya that substitutes fittingly the masturbation, marijuana and booze; where no language is understood unless it is spiced with four-letter words and no food as tasty as marijuana. He decides to go on leave for a year and think hopefully to come to a more meaningful existence.

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