SOCIO - CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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31

UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE'S *ENGLISH, AUGUST:* AN INDIAN STORY: A POST - COLONIAL STUDY

S.CHITRA. M.A. M.PHIL.

Upamanyu Chatterjee is the most representative writer of the 'urban novel'. His novels reveal anxiety about the modern Indian identity. There is also concern for rediscovering one's cultural roots and past and come to term with post-colonial status. The very title of Upamanyu Chatterjee's novel *English; August; An Indian Story* lays great emphasis on the story part of it at the outset. This is a story about an Indian by an Indian which might have been "Indian Agastya. An English Story." The title suggests that though the English have left, yet English still enjoys its Augustan day in India, as the story may be Indian but it is in English. The young generation finds August to be more convenient than Agastya.

Right from the moment the novel became available to the Indian writers, it has been a powerful means of exploration of the human situation. Chatterjee offers a complex view of the post-colonial society where alienation and exile seem to be an integral part of the human condition. The colonial legacy makes man suffer from an inexorable sense of alienation and exile and the portrayal of this suffering is evident in Agastya.

The protagonist, Agastya Sen is a westernized urbanite IAS officer of twenty four. Agastya Sen belongs to the new generation, "the generation of apes" (280), 'the Cola generation that doesn't oil its hair" (47) and "love to get AIDS just because it's raging in America" (76).

Alienation is seen throughout the novels. In *English; August* Agastya Sen's experiences as IAS trainee at Madna, an imaginary town in Maharastra is described.His background which has been responsible for shaping his sensibility is established in the very prestigious public school at Darjeeling. He wished he had been an Anglo Indian, that he had Keith or Alan for a name, that he spoke English with their

accent. From that day his friends gave him many names 'Last Englishman', 'hey English' and' August' which he finally accepts.

The reason for his rootlessness is not too hard to perceive. As Meenakshi Raykar comments, "His background has been a very powerful alienating force which has left a sense of displacement"(110). Professor Nissim Ezekiel has pointed out in his view of his novel in the *Indian Post,* "It is Agastya's Darjeeling School that established his alienation of which he remains conscious virtually throughout this Indian story"(qtd. In Ravi 125). Agastya seems to be misbegotten in a world which he doesn't seem to fit in. Agastya's uncle too, blames the educational system that doesn't improve Agastya's societical attitude. He is intensely tempted by western ideas and English language. Westernization, urbanization, convent education, cultural estrangement, prime motives for metropolitan life and worldly pleasures are the other reasons of alienation.

Agastya feels alienated not only professionally but even socially and culturally. Before coming to Madna, he has never had an experience of a provincial town. "Glimpses of Madna en route; Cigarette-and-Paan dhabas,disreputable food stalls, [...] he felt as though he was living someone else's life" (5). This is the first impression of Madna; an impression whish is going to haunt him for the remainder of his stay there. Unable to relate to the life around him, Agastya retreats to his own private world, the privacy of his room in the rest house.

The theme of exile runs through most of modern literature and one of its persistent concerns is to explore the possibilities of a reconciliation between man and his situation. Agastya Sen suffers from an inexorable sense of exile and this feeling of exile produced in him,an acute awareness of his colonial legacy, the two mutually opposed traditions, he has been heir to.Agastya Sen soon discovers that feelings of dislocation, rootlessness, anchorlessness and alienation are not his problems alone but of the whole generation.

Upamanyu Chatterjee has found ample space to swing his ideological stances on certain subjects as post colonial Indian bureaucracy, development, politics, language and education which tend to be integral parts of his Indian Story. In the Madna of the post colonial period the people are allowed to starve and die of thirst. The officials exploit them physically and financially. The Forest contractor indulges in "bribery the Forest officials, underpaying the tribals, beating others like him to a timber contract" (284).

The politicians are equally responsible for this bad state of undeveloped parts of the country like Madna and Jompanna. The novelist says that "for a politician, the mind and stomach, they're more or less the same" (191). The Indian bureaucracy behaves like crippled issues of colonial culture steeped in artificiality, snobbery,

inefficiency, and corruption. The new breed of the officers has to mix with the people in the post-colonial set up. They are supposed to be the servants of the people not their masters (23).

English has been associated with the colonial culture of the rulers, and whosoever rules or wishes to do so must speak it. The Indian psyche is so much beholden to it that all – particularly the young generation – wish to be 'the English type'. The nature of the Indian English is also hinted in one of the opening conversations between Agastya and Dhrubo: "Amazing mix, the English we speak. Hazaar fucked. Urdu American, [...] I am sure nowhere else could languages be mixed and spoken with such ease."(1)

English education and standard and system of education are other crucial issues. The novelist has dealt with the problem of education, and the place of the English language. Agastya sees the rottenness of Indian education at the time of the interview of candidates for the post of teacher: the candidates who could not answer, "What is twenty per cent of eighty?" and "who is called the Father of the Nation?" are finally selected to teach their teen age victims (86-87). In higher education the scenario is not much different as is proved by the appointment of Mrs. Srivastava as lecturer in the local college, which is not due to her academic excellence over others but is because she is the wife of the collector.

English, says Dhrubo, is the "language of the blood sucking imperialist, they made our hearts weep, and crippled us from appreciating our glorious heritage." How ever, English language and literature remain a growth industry. People are fascinated by English. It becomes evident that the young generation has started questioning and rejecting every colonial left. The question ultimately props up: "what is English doing in India? Ironically the question is asked in English. And "Since when has our education been successful?" asks Dhrubo (159).

Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August* focuses on the urgent need for decolonization not only of the bureaucratic structure in India but also of the colonial mind. Development cannot take place when masses are distanced from the administrators and in the absence of authentic selves who are engaged and concerned with the administration of the country.

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