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UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE'S ENGLISH, AUGUST : AN INDIAN STORY : AN EXISTENTIAL STUDY

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Existentialism is broadly an important aspect of modernism in art and literature. It is basically a philosophy of existence. The main aim of existentialism is to focus on the problems of human existence with a view to provide solutions. The leading existentialist thinkers have undermined the importance of objective way of life, which either materializes human existence or makes it artificial. Existentialism is certainly a subjective interpretation of life and it is mainly concerned with human existence in its totality. Broadly speaking, existentialism is a subjective interpretation of human life. In such a depiction of human life, man becomes completely involved with the riddles of life – always striving for absolute freedom, identity and purpose. Existentialism analyses and unfolds the mystery of human existence and emphasizes the importance of human personality and dignity.

Upamanyu Chatterjee comes under this group who portrays the existential struggles of modern man. His first novel, "English, August: An Indian Story", deals with the contemporary youth's search for identity. Agastya Sen the young I.A.S. officer's sense of dislocation, when suddenly

transplanted from his megalopolitan background to the realities of life in a small backward town Madna shows the predicament of young Indians. His cosmopolitan upbringing is a powerful alienating force, leading to a disturbing sense of rootlessness, disillusionment and disaffection. The narrative takes the protagonist through different stages in his attempts to come to terms with the new environment. Agastya suffers from boredom, alienation, rootlessness, nothingness, dread, despair, anxiety and the absurdity of life. He is not satisfied with the society and gets frustrated.

In this novel, the substance of life is experienced through social and political relations. He is confronted with two extremes of experience, Madna and Delhi, his mind confounded by the effort of bringing his disparate together: "Madna and Delhi seemed two extreme points of an unreal existence; the only palpable thing was the rhythm of the beast beneath him, a wonder that could link such disparate worlds together" Upamanyu Chatterjee (1988).

The main theme of existentialism is absurdity, which is compounded of dullness, boredom, anchorlessness and

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hopelessness. Agastya suffers from lambent dullness and boredom. He considers himself as one "with no special attitude for anything" and thinks "I should have been a photographer, or a maker of ad films, something like that, shallow and urban". Accustomed to metropolitan life, he finds happiness in nothing and thinks of himself as misbegotten in a world which he does not seem to fit in. He feels "emptier than usual" and thinks that he is "wasting my time here" Upamanyu Chatterjee (1988).

His mundane life consists of dozing a little in his claustrophobic room, watching lizards racing across the room, day dreaming, thinking of the past, extracting an invitation for a meal either from his seniors, friends or subordinates to escape the awful meals prepared by the guest house cook and visiting various officers to learn the intricacies of bureaucracy.

For a year Agastya has to move from one room in the rest house to another room in some other house; it is homelessness of a kind, a physical manifestation of an inner sense of restlessness. His experiences on the first day, consisting of an integration meeting, the sea of humanity waiting for justice around the collector's office, the collector's overbearing manner leaves him with a lambent dullness. He does not see a way out of his uneasiness and suffocation. He wants to run away from this situation.

At the very beginning of novel Upamanyu Chatterjee spells out his protagonist's predicament:

"Anchorlessness – that was to be one of his chaotic concerns in that uncertain year; battling a sense of waste was to be another. Other fodder too, in the farrago of his mind, self-pity in an uncongenial clime, the incertitude of his reactions to Madna, his job and his inability to relate to it – other abstractions too, his niche in the world, his future, the elusive mocking nature of happiness, the possibility of its attainment" Upamanyu Chatterjee (1988).

Agastya constantly feels that he is living somebody else's life, for he finds no coherence between his past and present life, or even between the three spheres - the official, the unofficial and the private, of his Madna life. He realises that he is totally confused about what he wants in life or how he could find a way out of his vague restlessness. He has no hope, no aim. He wants to be happy in a modernised society. August also knows that he represents many who are like him with no special attitude for anything, not even wondering how to manage, not even thinking.

We find the sense of alienation, dislocation and exile in this novel. Agastya's arrival in the hot, dusty town of Madna triggers an acute sense of dislocation. In Madna, he encounters a variety of people who hold out possible ways of overcoming his sense of dissatisfaction and alienation. Finding all these unacceptable, he takes recourse to escapism and retreats into an enclosed world of his own.

Agastya is dissatisfied with the contemporary culture, its standards and its moves. The protagonist's sense of alienation is counterpointed against his father's maturity and knowledge of life and the letters he writes to his son are eloquent testimony of these traits. For example, this advice: "But Ogu, remember that Madna is not an alien place. You must give it time. I think you will like your job eventually, but if you don't, think concretely of what you want to do instead, and change" Upamanyu Chatterjee (1988).

Not only professionally, but even socially and culturally Agastya feels alienated. Before coming to Madna, he has never had an experience of a provincial town. Places and people and events which had earlier been just names out of newspapers, suddenly assume a reality whose meaning and significance escape him.

"Glimpses of Madna en route; Cigarette – and – paan dhabas, disreputable food stalls, both lit by fierce kerosene lamps, cattle and clanging rickshaws on the road, and the rich sound of trucks in slush from an overflowing drain; he felt as though he was living someone else's life" Upamanyu Chatterjee (1988).

Agastya suffers from an inexorable sense of exile and this feeling of exile is produced in him by an acute awareness of his colonial legacy, the two mutually opposed traditions, he has been heir to. Agastya disavows the western values, but this rejection does not imply a return to the

pure precolonial past, because Agastya realizes that this return is neither possible nor desirable. He resigns his job and leaves in search of alternative values which would provide him with a stable identity. But until this search ends, he must continue to remain an exile.

Chatterjee offers a complex view of the post-colonial society where exile and alienation seem to be an integral part of 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, who according to Kumar (1997) can be rightly called the "bastard of the west".

Another important theme is that of frustration. The protagonist's frustration towards life and bureaucracy is evident in this novel. The hero is influenced by westernised thought and hunger for that kind of life. He belongs to the new generation termed "Cola generation", the generation that does not oil its hair, the generation of apes and the generation that would love to get AIDS because it is raging in America. "You are an absurd combination", says Agastya's uncle, "a boarding-school-English-Literature educationist and an obscure name from Hindu myth" Upamanyu Chatterjee (1988). He is named after Agastya, which is transformed into August by his anglophile friends because August is more convenient than Agastya. His parents too add their bit to this and his name is compressed to 'Ogu'.

In Madna, Agastya has become more perceptive and sensitive. His first trip into the district opens his eyes to new realities. But Agastya's mind continued to be restless and unsettled. In such a mood, "Agastya was enraged at himself 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 time" Upamanyu Chatterjee (1988).

He felt that he was neither master of his fate nor time. Agastya strongly felt that most men like him "chose in ignorance, and fretted in an uncongenial world, and learnt to accept compromise, with or without grace or slipped into despair" Upamanyu Chatterjee (1988). The contrast between his life in Madna and Delhi exposes the shallowness of his existence. The feeling of loneliness starts haunting him.

Feelings of dread, anxiety and despair are the hall marks of the protagonist of this novel under discussion. He finds happiness in nothing. Agastya's cynicism is only a mask for rage and despair. This is a book that tells us in the first paragraph that so often Agastya rests his head on his armrest and weeps silently.

Thus, Agastya experiences existential struggles in the modern society. These sufferings are also found in other characters. We find these problems in Dhruvo, his friend, Shankar, Sathe, Dr. Multani, John Avery, Renu and Neera.

Sathe tells his own story beginning with his father's migration from Bombay to Madna to his father's business as a forest

contractor and his brother's course in Hotel Management. When Agastya puts the question, "Then what are you doing in Madna?", he replies, "I like the place" and then turns it around, "with a question like that you really reveal yourself, Mr. Sen, your past, your bewilderment and boredom. Are you not surprised at seeing me in Madna, I wear Levi's and read Yes, Minister?". The real answer to Agastya's question is suspended till almost at the end of the novel where Sathe points out: "Madna is home for me, August, in Bombay I felt lost. My best years, my past, is here, bittersweet because it is gone. Whatever you choose to do, you will regret everything or regret nothing" Upamanyu Chatterjee (1988).

There is a striking resemblance between Sathe and Agastya in one respect, for neither of them opts for the profession seemingly imposed on them by their parents. The contrast to Agastya's state of displacement is provided by an Englishman John Avery and his wife to be 'Sita', a South Indian girl whom he met in England. John has specially come to India in search of the place 'Gorapak' where his grandfather, the collector of Madna fifty years earlier, was mauled by a tiger. His grandfather was quite happy in Madna, says Avery to Agastya who is thoroughly bored at the place.

The novel touches but briefly on the saga of partition. In a couple of pages it catches essence of the emotional turmoil of people of a divided nation. It has been one long and lonely trek from Lahore to Madna for Dr. Multani. The satisfaction of seeing

his son through medical college may be a comforting thought but true happiness is elusive as old memories continue to haunt him. The pathetic condition of displaced people, victims of partition, is conveyed most poignantly when he tells Agastya Sen, "Darson [his son] is lucky, I would think, he has not been a refugee like me – wanderers clutching only our pasts – we had nothing else". Many years later this emptiness continues to haunt Mr. Multani. Upamanyu Chatterjee (1988).

Renu and Neera emerge as offshoots of an era of post-modernity characterized by confusion, nihilism, irrational and disbelief. Renu has constructed American cultural virus and in this state of transition she seems to have been wrenched by confusion. She confesses in the letter that she feels "wary and strained" and her face becomes "blank, bored and closed". She feels her American friends' warmth like "a terrific obligation and responsibility" Upamanyu Chatterjee (1988).

Shankar, an executive engineer who also feels banished in Madna, abandons his destiny to goddess Jagadamba. Having already spent a considerable period of time in Madna, the judge is yet unable to grapple with the feeling of dislocation. He feels that, for him, salvation is only possible with his retirement.

In Delhi, Agastya, to his dismay discovers that his bosom friend Dhruvo, is unhappy with the nature of his job in the corporate world and is even contemplating joining the IAS. His indignation when told of Agastya's desire to quit his job is evident

when he remarks: "Just who and where do you think you are, an American taking an ear off after college to discover himself?". His cousin Tonic's anger is equally clear when he admonishes Agastya, telling him that leaving such a job "is a ridiculously high price to pay for trying to regain some of the shallow pleasures of our past life". He suggests that as an IAS officer, he has a real chance to do something constructive about the social system. Madan, his other college friend, is also frustrated with his job in a chartered account's office. Agastya realises that restlessness crosses the boundaries of place, that his friends in Delhi were as restless as he had been in Madna.

We find the theme of quest for self-realisation or a journey from rootlessness to maturity in this novel. It is an exposition of the predicament of the modern youth in this vast and complex country. There is a sense of dislocation and a general meaninglessness, as the result of the protagonist's search for identity is sometimes pathetic, sometimes humorous, even ridiculous. However, it ultimately turns out to be a journey from rootlessness to maturity, in short, a struggle to come to terms with oneself against the complex realities of the country.

The crux of Agastya's quest lies in striking a balance between his megalopolitan sensibilities and the realities of life in a background town of this country. Madna, a provincial town, serves as the background to Agastya's quest. Right from the first day in Madna, Agastya suffers from a sense of rootlessness.

A small but decisive turn occurs when he meets Govinda Sathe, a cartoonist by profession, hence called the "Joker of Madna". Sathe gives Agastya a copy of the Bhagavad Gita and insists that he read it. As a result he approached The Gita with the degree of apprehension. Agastya reads those passages in the Gita which discussed the problem of the restless mind, where Krishna tells Arjuna: "It is indeed hard to train. But by constant practice and by freedom from passions the mind in truth can be trained" Upamanyu Chatterjee (1988). He had earlier taken recourse to Marcus Aurelius, finding in problems a bonding with the ancient Roman Philosopher. On the other hand, The Gita offers the possibilities of solutions. This shows Agastya's newly formed desire to look for solutions rather than brood on the problems. It is thus we find a positive step in Agastya's quest for identity.

Sathe's words of wisdom "whatever you choose to do, you will regret everything or regret nothing. Remember you are not James Bond, you only live once" Upamanyu Chatterjee (1988), strikes the decisive chord in Agastya's mind. He realises that the crux of his search for identity and the solution for his restlessness lies in coming to terms with the harsh realities of subcontinent. Thus, in this novel we find a journey from rootlessness to maturity, self-realization, a struggle to come to terms with oneself against the complex realities of this country.

Modern man becomes more and more unhistorical, estranged from himself and

from his past, opposed to traditional values and disloyal to his cultural heritage. Modern man's existential condition depicted with dark shades and colors applied in a gloomy mood of overpowering pessimism which can be best identified as the symptoms of an overall crisis of life. Agastya is morally and culturally degenerated youth. In him we cannot able to find moral values. He rejects the values of life. Agastya is preoccupied with sex, both natural and unnatural, literature and soft drugs.

For existentialism, responsibility is the dark side of freedom. When individuals realize that they are completely responsible for their decisions, actions, and beliefs, they are overcome by society. They try to escape from this society by ignoring or denying their freedom and their responsibility. But because this amounts to ignoring or denying their actual situation, they succeed only in deceiving themselves. As an IAS officer, Agastya has many responsibilities. But he rejects the responsibilities and tries to escape from that situation. Agastya does not relish working in Madna, as Srivastav, Kumar and others do. His uneasiness is increased by his close observation of Indian bureaucracy, which he thinks is incapable of delivering desired goals.

Upamanyu Chatterjee is conscious of the absurdities inherent in human life. He feels that man is incongruous with the conditions provided for his existence. The individual, he says, revolts against life when he fails to find any meaning in it and faces the unreasonableness of existence and

absurdity of life. The existential encounter with 'nothingness' is the core of modern life. Today, everything conspires towards a philosophy of boredom, nothingness and absurdity. The protagonist adopts the existentialist, heroic posture necessary to face the ordeals of life. He adopts the decadent type of existentialism that borders on nihilism. Chatterjee's novel expresses this clearly.

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