Strange Obsessions, Evasive Fear and the Idea of Welfare State in the Fiction of Upmanyu Chatterjee

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Abstract: There is no doubt in saying that the English studies in India in the last twenty years have undergone a sea – change. From the last decade of eighties new ideas and voices came in a flux in Indian English writing, especially in the arena of fiction. The Novels of Salman Rushdie, Vikaram Seth, Vikram Chandra, Amitav Ghosh, Gita Mehta, Arundhuti Roy explored the possibilities of life and literature, likewise Upmanyu Chatterjee’s fiction highlights the botched civilization with a difference. After the domestic ethical and metaphysical novels of the trio, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan during the pre-independence period, the second generation has excelled in all fields, in the third generation, a new lyra came into the literary horizon of India, that is Upmanyu Chatterjee, promising to veer the direction of fiction from mere transcendental and abstract note to real and concrete aspects of life. That does not mean that the predecessors were altogether transcendental, rather their portrayal is more transcendental than real whereas Upmanyu Chatterjee is ‘naturalistic’ in his own way.

I. Introduction

With a visibly greater accent on the private and immediate Chatterjee rebelled against the moralizing, mythical attitude of his predecessors. In terms of outlook, the novelist revealed an agnostic, highly critical and eclectic attitude towards life which distrusted and even detested the Miltonic hangovers as was evident in the literature of the pre-independence and to a large extent in the post-independent ethos. Upmanyu Chatterjee has written four novels till now. Two of his novels expressly show the savagery and dismal state of bureaucracy in India. His very first novel (English, August’1988) displays a world rarely seen in modern Indian writing, revealing a detailed knowledge of the heartland that can result only from the personal experience. The novel wears the crown of authenticity uneasily, partly because the book is so charmingly unassuming, so natural and assured, that it would be uncomfortable with any crown at all. Agstya’s story in the novel is convincing, entertaining, moving and at the same time timeless. It merits an accolade that’s for harder to earn than ‘authentic’.

II. Literature Review

The first novel of Chatterjee ‘English August’ is the story of a young civil servant Agastya (August) Sen. joining the Indian Administrative service (IAS), which the author Chatterjee himself joined at the same age in 1983. Agastya, the hero of the novel is sent off for a year’s training in the district administration to a small district town called Madna. The only claim to a much of any fame for the place is that it is almost invariably a contender for the title of the hottest place in the India. In the opening scene, Agastya’s friend and fellow Marijuana smoker Dhruboo tells him ‘give a feeling, August; you are going to get hazard fucked in the Madna, which sets much of tone of the novel. Indeed the novel presents a new generation of Indian already strongly influenced by modern American culture.

It is generation that is not entirely disaffected or alienated, but that is unsure of its feature, its goals and its ambitions. Agastya, often affable but generally choosing to remain an outsider too, more than others. The changes in society are even more pronounced when seen from Madna, a small place of extremes, that obviously can’t quite keep up with the fast paced life and changes in the big cities. Agastya has chosen to join the enormous bureaucracy that runs India, the IAS, it is an easy target for satire and Chatterjee does not waste the opportunity. Agastya is an unlikely bureaucrat and he does not strain himself to fit in. He speaks lies intentionally, inventing wild stories at the spur of the moment. He smokes pot, often against his will. He
masturbates. He does what he has to at his job but that really is not all that much. He goes through motions traveling, dealing with officials and visitors but most of what he does still seems to baffle him.

III. Scope

Agastya is still youth, trying to find meaning and direction. I have become your American, taking a year off college to discover himself, Agastya writes to Dhruboo at the end of the year in Madna and the training year is, indeed, very much like that. There are moment of discovery, Agastya begin to have some sues of what is important and what is interest to him. There are no absolutes, no certainties, but perhaps an outline that grows more distinct. He is restless and he does consider escape form Madna and a career in the IAS. He flees briefly back to the big city and consider taking a job in publishing. But he does return to stick it out in Madna. There are numerous smaller and larger episodes and encounters, the bizarre demands and most function of bureaucracy, the people, and one has to deal with. There are women, friends, family; especially his prominent father Agastya is still drifting, unwilling, and unable to commit himself fully to anything. Chatterjee presents this very sympathetically, the ‘weitschmerz’ is not annoying and Agastya fortunately does not take himself too seriously.

IV. Requirement of The Work

The book is a satire, strange obsessions and evasive fear looms large in every page of the novel. Agastya’s pent-up feelings, his restless attitude, etc. proves the point. Chatterjee also has a fairly deft touch of mixing the absurd with the poignant, the slap it stick with the clever. Chatterjee’s wry tone and the particular poignancy fits well with this laid back protagonist to bring out the strange obsession in the novel. Reality around him is decidedly odd, and he has little interest in confronting it head on Marijuana, masturbation, daydreams, and marches Aurelia’s ‘Meditation’ are for now, still preferable even as they further warp his perception of the world around him.

Agastya’s purposeless life is showed in the context of building a welfare state where the grotesquery of governance is a major factor. Being an IAS officer Chatterjee finely presents the absurdities and the abstract nature of bureaucracy in India with a fine touch of irony and satire.

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