

Cultural Crisis in Upamanyu Chatterjee's English August: An Indian Story

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ABSTRACT

The genre of Indian English has acquired a respectable place in the comity of world fiction. Literature of each age has its own characteristic and the literature of each country has its own ethos. India as a country has its own culture and civilization and its literature bears testimony.

Keywords: characteristic and the literature, culture and civilization.

I. INTRODUCTION

English August is the story of a young civil servant Agastya (August) Sen, who is sent off for a year's training in district administration to a small and uneventful district town called Madna. Brought up in cosmopolitan cities like Calcutta and Delhi all his life, Agastya finds it difficult to adjust to the ambience in Madna.

Culture is an integral part of a nation. Culture is

“a particular form or type of intellectual of life of an entire society and includes codes of manners, dress, language, rituals, social customs and folklore of a nation”.

India had a glorious cultural heritage that went back to the Vedic era. But the interaction with the western world through the British, the Portuguese and the French for about three hundred years did bring forth some new patterns of cultural behaviour development in a society generated regarding traditional versus modernity, dwindling of the conventional value system, ambivalent cultural responses to the impact of the west, social and economical

disparities, colonial consciousness as a hangover of the British rule etc. by its distinctive customs, achievements and outlook. Broadly speaking, culture is taken as constituting the way and value system which generated new tension in society. Twentieth century Indian writers took due note of these, and the themes and art of characterization in their writings bear testimony to it. These writers including Upamanyu Chatterjee articulate important questions in their works.

One factor that emerges here is that of the cross-cultural ethos that marks the writings of most of the writers in India, Upamanyu Chatterjee, a representative novelist not only exhibits distinct and deep awareness of the social and cultural realities around him, but he also succeeds in simulating the same in his writings. In the novel, Mrs. Rajan tells the protagonist

"...Agastya-you have a lovely name, really, so ethnic-how would you define the word "India"?(p.187)

Agastya is in a quandary not knowing the cultural and mythic import of his name whereas he knows well his social status as an IAS officer. His identity is somehow confusing a his name Agastya is changed to August in English. Dhruvo's comment,

"I've feeling, august, you're going to get bazaar in Madna" sets much of the tone of the novel as a marked pointer to cultural confusion to Agastya. Agastya also recognize the confusion the often-quoted opening". Amazing mix, the English we speak...our accents are Indian, but we prefer August to Agastya"(p.1).

Agastya's father Madhusudan Sen became the Governor of Bengal. He was a Bengali Hindu but he married a Goan Christian. A strange combination indeed! A mingling of two cultures and two faiths. The principle of unity in diversity which is the cardinal virtue of Indian culture seems to have been put into practice under the binding force of love. Pultukaku forewarned his elder brother before his marriage in a letter,

"Your children will culturally be mongrels. The past makes us what we are, you will deprive them of coherence" (p.129).

The protagonist's later life shows the vacuum created by his mother's early demise a sense of insecurity, outlook towards life and sense of non belongings. Another serious problem is drug addiction. It hampers both individual and nation. Agastya picked up this habit during his college days at Darjeeling in the company of his peers like Prashant. The drug habit persisted when Agastya proceeded to Madna and later on it became almost a passion. When Agastya uncle discovered that Agastya and Madna were smoking in the college for the first time, he became scathingly cynical and when Agastya went for training to Madna his last word at Delhi railway station were,

"If you have to smoke that ganja, smoke in secret. It is not an addiction for display" (p.28).

Chatterjee's novel also portrays the post independence scenario with a special focus on bureaucracy. It is powerful enough to focus on the faults and foibles of Post-Independence conclusion. The officer of an IAS is very important. He can either make or mar the nation. The evils that have pointed out need to be eradicated and a freshness of outlook needs to be generated as it was done by Jawaharlal Nehru.

"Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. We end today a period of ill fortune and India discovers herself again."Are we brave enough to grasp this opportunity and accept the challenge of the future"?

The novel projects hybridized position of earlier Agastya and the troubled consciousness of Agastya and portrays the conflict within his fractured self. The conflict finally forces Sen the son of a governor, anglicized and megapolitan, sensitive, young, lover of music, with a public school education. To step out his colonial self, his western education and training and discover himself through his own cultural moorings. His first glimpse of Madna, a small provincial town in the south, where he is posted a trainee, disturbs and unsettles him.

“...cigarette-and paan, dhabas, disrespectful food stalls both lit by fierce kerosene lamps, cattle and clanging rickshaws on the road..he felt as if he was living someone’s life(p.5).

Agastya’s public school education alienates him from his culture heritage and his position as IAS officer distances him from the masses. Every human being necessarily ‘encultured’ his or her identity is constituted out of cultural experience. He has no doubt that he is an Indian Bengali. But he is distanced from his native culture and tradition from ties that bind-family, friend, history and myth of land. He does not get his education or training in the indigenous cultural texts, such as *the Bhagavat, the Puranas or the Gita*. Agastya fails to realize the mythical import of his name. Agastya, August, Ogo, Mr.Sen IAS, his numerous

‘.names seemed like aliases, for his different lives’

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