

READING THE MULTIPLE IDENTITIES AND THE VARIED DYNAMICS OF ANTITHESES IN UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE'S *ENGLISH, AUGUST*

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to instigate the intricate estimations of identity that Upamanyu Chatterjee's English August brings forth and interrogates further by focusing on the varied antithetical representations of generation and ways of life. Thus it not only takes into consideration the problematics of the psyche of the protagonist but also negotiates with the complex fabric of multiple generations and varied idioms of individual identities always dwelling in a state of flux.

Keywords: Identity, Antitheses, Generation, Dislocation, Self, Other

Apparently a narrative of an Indian youth's bureaucratic experiences, Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August: An Indian Story* comprises different layers of meanings and elicits manifold interpretations. Apart from the protagonist's journey of self-exploration, it delves further into the psyche of a generation and the collective social consciousness, burdened with the dislocation and a sense of alienation. This paper seeks to interrogate the complex interface of protagonist's pluralistic identities, how he administers his various kinds of selves, differing in actuality and expression. It explores how his urban-centric cynicism juxtaposes with the rural transparency and simple way of life. The problematics of his life and practices, how his plight is relevant and interrelated with the previous generation's way of life, despite having an apparent disparity in outlook and in ideology, are issues of paramount importance and demand a critical mode of study and analysis.

English, August opens with Agastya, the protagonist, driving a car down a silent and lonely street of Delhi with his friend Dhruvo who is preparing another joint to smoke. The scene bears much implication as driving a car in India is suggestive of considerable wealth and cannabis indicates reckless impulsive bent of mind. They are the children born and brought up in privileged urban household. Soon enough, we come to know that Agastya has been selected in Indian Administrative Service and will have to leave Delhi for his probationary training. The young man is bound to Madna, an uneventful small district town.

This brief scene sets the tone of the entire novel and anticipates the kind of life filled with boredom and absurdity that Agastya is going to experience.

Agastya feels a kind of estrangement and dislocation when he is thrust into a rural belt of India for his civil service training purposes. Having been far away from the megalopolitan lifestyle, he tries to be accustomed with the bureaucratic way of life where the sense of anguish is enervating and cynicism takes precedence. This detachment is not the first of its kind. His whole life he has been detached from his own cultural and traditional moorings. This alienation is varied and different in character and content. He does not have a definite idea regarding his identity and is confused having been unable to find answers to who he really is. Culturally as well as socially, he inhabits a subjective and represented reality which is in stark contrast to the objective social reality. This leads to an existential futility and unstable identity characterized by an apathetic inbetweenness. This wide and varied spectrum of his alienation demands an insightful speculative rereading that will help us assess and comprehend the crisis and the perplexity of a character, otherwise unidentifiable to and unexplored by his own self. Agastya's journey has been an exploration of several identity traits and an attempt to seek resolution for identifying with one 'self'.

Agastya cannot hold together with anything around him and instead of locating one 'self' his identity divulges into multiple 'others'. His identity is a flux rather than being in fixity. He exhibits different versions of 'self' as depending on different circumstances. Different situations demand different role-playing. His whole life has been a role-playing as if he is living someone else's life, some other lives (Chatterjee 5).

When the protagonist had come to know about the anatomy and politics of bureaucracy, we find him taking up a new role, a new 'other' to rely on. This practice is quite predominant in administrative circle as everybody there adopts a particular identity and exhibits that in public. If the sub-divisional magistrate Mr. Rameri is known for his exaggerated self-opinion, there is Rajan's outrageous arrogance widespread among the officers. Their perfect public image differs from their imperfect erring selves. One such instance is when the ever-scowling Srivastav warns Agastya that being an IAS, he should be careful of the company he keeps in Madna. As an officer, his designation does not allow him to mix with everybody around him. What he does even after office is not entirely his private business, he is ought to be responsible to Government in the afterhours (Chatterjee 81). But in an ironical turn of events, according to a newspaper report, we come to know that the collector is in an illicit relationship with a female B.D.O. The relationship ended with the B.D.O's committing suicide.

Agastya's identity of being an I.A.S is somehow imposed upon him and indiscriminately tagged to his name. Whenever he is seen by the people of Madna, he is identified as 'Mr. Sen, IAS. "IAS was always to be attached to his name; it almost became his surname" (Chatterjee 5). The look and the attire should also be according the ceremonious grandeur of an executive. He is "ought to be soft and clean-shaven, bespectacled..."

(Chatterjee 3). Even his friend thinks that he does not look like the role. Later his capability to hold his office and expertise in his duty is to only be attributed to his being an IAS, a national-level examination qualifier. If he had been a state-level executive, his efficiency might have been questioned being compared to a bureaucrat who had qualified a national eligibility test, without taking into consideration his work ethics or competent functioning. In his demeanor, style and authority, he is expected to play a role of distinct elegance and enigma which further advocates the evident ambiguity in his identity.

Agastya's self-alienation is rooted in cultural inconsistency. This inconsistency is intrinsically connected with one's identity. His sense of lacking a precise unadulterated identity gets deepened for being far and detached from his own culture and tradition. The constitution of one's identity depends on the varied dynamics of one's socio-cultural condition consisting of diverse indigenous cultural experiences and its inherent attributes. Urban-centric youths like Agastya are the victims of cultural and ideological distortions made prominent by a foreign cultural discourse. It gets incorporated within one's self through institutions that advocate a westernized way of life and attempt to inculcate western values. Madhuri Bite in one of her articles remarks, "The fictional world of Upamanyu Chatterjee is a postmodern world marked by the visible symptoms like collapse of the grand narratives of Indian values and an emphasis on consumerist style of living" (1).

Agastya has an ethnic hindu name which refers to a learned and revered sage of Indian mythology, appearing in the Ramayana as well as in the Mahabharata. He with his magical and spiritual prowess pushed the mountains to stop the Vindhyas from growing and his deeds stand apart from and antithetical to that of Agastya's. But his namesake does not even feel to move his body after having a high dose of marijuana and prefers skipping meetings and official gatherings by staying at home living an insular life. He is even completely unaware of the implications of his name. His name is anglicized as 'August', sometimes even 'English'. His uncle endearingly calls him 'Ogu' which is a bengali derivative. His Paltukaku becomes angry when he comes to know of these hybridized names and considers them foolish imitation of European junkies.

He is detached from the bonds of family, friends, lore and legends, customs and beliefs of his motherland. He has been educated in a boarding school away from his home, away from his family. His root to love, care and affection has been severed long ago. The death of his mother caused a greater turbulence though its implication is not described apparently but it lies deeper and goes beyond the passing remark of the event. He visited his father occasionally because his father being a governor does not have much leisure to attend his son, which complicates the issue further. For him home is not a place where public myths and private memories stand together.

He is unfamiliar to indigenous texts like the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and Bhagbat Gita or Puranas. A translated copy of Ramayana serves only to content his curiosity. Even when he reads Gita, his voice and intonation somehow seems as if a discordant note has been

struck. He remains circumscribed by a world of Markus Aurelius, western music and western philosophy. This metamorphosis is not sudden and results from the interface of his past and present. Chatterjee intertwines his boarding life at Darjeeling, his university days in Delhi, his days spent in Calcutta and his remote existence at Madna. M. Maheswari observes,

Agastya's past does not integrate into his present. The dislocation between his present and past makes him restless. He thus seeks help in the psychedelic and unreal world of drugs. Time and again his mind goes back to his past and Madna, he longs for simple touches of his past. (59)

He is torn between different terrains yet does not entirely belong to either of them. His restlessness and depression is a pathetic consequence of this existential inbetweenness. He feels that he needs to understand something which is beyond his comprehension. The constituting of an identity through constant crisscross of one's own cultural and social experiences remains hindered and exhibits itself through the irrevocable crisis of self and identity.

In India, the first generation of youth after decolonization represented by Agastya's father and Paltukaku, could not successfully acknowledge and therefore embrace the western values, culture and tradition within their way of life. This happened because of their partial aversion towards it and the strong and fixed indigenous root. But the colonial disruption into the Indian society had a greater impact which still persists and reverberates through generations. This earlier generation allowed their descendents to go beyond and to inculcate within themselves western values and practices. But the next generation represented by Agastya and Dhruva and their likes, does not excel in the process either and somehow gets stuck in a state of confused and disoriented ideology. The antithetical representation of these two generations is what Upamanyu Chatterjee perfectly delineates and gives us a comprehensive evaluation of that time and its far-reaching significance. The character of Madhusudan Sen is in stark contrast with that of Agastya. He is a former Indian Civil Servant. He had been Chief Election Commissioner and Home Secretary. He now holds the office of the Governor of West Bengal. Madhusudan Sen knows his son well and his apprehensions regarding Agastya's difficult stay at Madna have been correct. Anticipating the turn of events, he wrote to his son that this job would hold "glimpses of other situations and existences which might initially prove to be startling" (Chatterjee 95). Thus when he comes to know about his misery he is not shocked but feels a tinge of sadness and says that Madna is not an alien place and he must give it time and eventually he would like his job. In a latter discussion, he describes to Agastya his own experiences and reaction when he was posted to Konkan after getting selected in the I.C.S:

Madna must have placed your Delhi and Calcutta in perspective, it must have. The same happened with me when I was in the Konkan, forty years ago. But I suppose my reactions were different from yours. After Presidency College, the Konkan was a wonderful surprise. (Chatterjee 148)

What Agastya lacks is his father's ability to accept that life is full of surprises and one has to take things that way. He cannot apprehend anything beyond his isolated world that he has created for his lone self.

Agastya's uncle Paltukaku too rebukes him when he learns that Agastya wishes to leave the much coveted job. He says if people of generation were young they would not have behaved so flippantly. There was difficulty to acquire jobs. And Madhusudan attributes to Agastya more sense than he possesses. Agastya has always known security, that is why his approach towards these events has been so shallow.

There is no wrong in leaving a job if one is not satisfied with it. Many people do so. But in such cases they proceed with alternatives in mind guided by their passion. In case of Agastya, he wishes to leave the job because he wishes to lead his life in a metropolitan city like Delhi or Calcutta, not because he has other ambitions to fulfill. That's why he intends to join cousin Tonic's publishing farm because it will provide him the opportunity to stay in Delhi, without even knowing anything about publishing.

Visiting Baba Ramanna's Ashram, he comes to know the story of Ramanna who sacrificed a life of wealth and prosperity in Bangalore and came to build a rehabilitation centre in Madna to cure lepers. Even his son Shankaran Kanranth left his medical profession, following his father's footsteps, came to Madna to serve these people. Their generosity and magnanimity shakes him from within but this impression does not last long and proves to be inconsequential for him. This gesture by Ramanna and his son is presented contrary to Agastya's indifference and apathy to the world outside him. Apart from this, far from the anglophile urban-centric world, there are characters like Sathe who feels home at Madna and does not wish to adopt an alien culture to deprive himself of his root and traditional and cultural moorings. Upamanyu Chatterjee creates a dexterous pattern of meanings and interpretations by his vivid characterisation and illustrates diverse ways of life by juxtaposing the contraries, thereby recognizes the subtle complications of a rich and dynamic character like Agastya and his generation.

Though Agastya's plight has been the primary focus of the text, it also concentrates on the agony of the entire "cola generation". They suffer from a sense of ambiguity and discontentment. Agastya's childhood friend Dhrubo had completed his Ph.D from Yale and works in CitiBank. He too wishes to leave his job, indicative of their restlessness. Mahindra Bhatia, another friend of Agastya, has become a Forest officer in Madna. He is so much fascinated with western way of life that he can even embrace AIDS simply because it is an American thing. Agastya and Mahindra who did not have much acquaintance in their college days discover their affinity in the sense of estrangement and discontentment. As M. Maheswari aptly puts, "They are all hybrids and although their "hybridity delights", it rankles when it comes too close to erasing comfortable boundaries" (58).

At the end of the novel, Agastya realizes that he would "always be wandering, thinking chaotically of alternatives..." (Chatterjee 284). He is bound for an eternal journey where life

is in constant movement without any definite purpose. His irresoluteness defines the course of the entire novel and yet he remains at the end as baffling as he was at the beginning of his journey. He learns to acknowledge his diverse selves, attempts to rearrange a chaotic life and failing to do so he somehow accepts to flow with the drift and the disorder, recognizing his failure with grace:

The flux of the sea now seemed the only pattern, within and beyond the mind – mirrored even in his encounters with the myriad faces, on some of which he had tried to impose an order by seeing them as mirror-images, facets of his own self, but now that longing, for repose through the mastering of chaos, itself seemed vain. Perhaps it was true that he had first to banish all yearning, and learn to accept the drift...” (Chatterjee 278)

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