



UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE DECONSTRUCTED

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ABSTRACT

Upamanyu Chatterjee is one contemporary Indian English author who has attracted adulation and admonition in equal measures. His critics, who find his novels often dealing with unpalatable issues, loaded with heavy negativity, cynicism and turgid expressions, however, unanimously aver that he is witty and intelligent, endowed with a unique style of wry playfulness mixed with keen observation. He defies conventions and is rarely calm or 'normal' in his novels. Having emerged as a sort of champion of the de-centred and de-cultured, Chatterjee delves deep in the postmodern ethos of the contemporary Indian scenario. But the question is, are the 'bleak-books' of Upamanyu Chatterjee really devoid of any redeeming positive value? The study attempts to get the answer of this very question through the process of deconstruction of author's sensibility and the examination of formative influences on his creativity.

Keywords: Thematic preoccupations, Ideology and Philosophy, Ironic Vision, formative process

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Upamanyu Chatterjee is one contemporary Indian English author who has attracted adulation and admonition in equal measures. His critics, who find his novels often dealing with unpalatable issues, loaded with heavy negativity, cynicism and turgid expressions, however, unanimously aver that he is witty and intelligent, endowed with a unique style of wry playfulness mixed with keen observation. He defies conventions and is rarely calm or 'normal' in his novels. Anjana Sharma equates Chatterjee's vision of humanity with W.B. Yeats. She writes, "Chatterjee recaptures in essence Yeats' vision of a dark and bestial society. Eighty years apart, cultures, civilizations, even craft and temperament apart, Yeats and Chatterjee share an identical vision of a de-centered, de-natured world."ⁱ But the question is, are the 'bleak-books' of Upamanyu Chatterjee really devoid of any redeeming positive value? Henry James has remarked:

The great truth..., however, is, I think, that one never really chooses one's general range of vision- the experience from which ideas and themes and suggestions spring; this proves ever what it has *had* to be, this is one with the very turn one's life has taken; so that whatever it 'gives', whatever it makes us feel and think of, we regard very much as imposed and inevitable. The subject thus pressed upon the artist is the necessity of his case and the fruit of his consciousness; which truth makes and ever has made of any general quarrel with his subject, any stupid attempts to go behind *that*, the true stultification of criticism...ⁱⁱ

According to the above remark there is an inevitable attraction between the artist's 'vision' and his 'subjects', which cause a repetition of certain patterns and themes that determine the fabric of his emotional and mental framework. Upamanyu

Chatterjee's body of work convinces that his themes or the subjects of his vision are 'the necessity of his case and the fruit of his consciousness', and the way he feels, thinks and reflects his sentiments constitute his peculiar attitude. His attitude is fundamentally ironic and the expression is wry in depicting the incongruities, the disparities, the contrasts, the contradictions inherent in the contemporary existence.

In an attempt to decipher the unique brand of bleakness and grotesquery Chatterjee's novel carry, it becomes imperative to deconstruct the ideology of author Chatterjee.

"One's ideology is the history interpreted according to facts; it is a factual ideology, not like the superstitious beliefs of religion. One's ideology has direct experience behind it, not mere visions and illusions...it may be the outcome of study, of comparisons, of accepting certain facts and denying others, and your conclusions may be the product of experience."ⁱⁱⁱ

Chatterjee subverts established norms; he is an interesting mix of intellectual and weird, instructive and pathetic, shocking and amusing, harshly critical but with a flash of sympathy. His novels exemplify his approach to the ideas of his time, and that happens to be extremely cynical. They try to capture the beat of a sensitized generation and a nation struggling to reorient itself in the early days of what is now called globalization. They project the horrifying reality of disintegrating middle class family values in modern times and at the same time also demonstrate how the biggest impediment in the path of nation's development happens to be the 'welfare state' itself.

In a bid to understand Chatterjee's sensibility, the reasons of his thematic preoccupation, his peculiar responses to pressing concerns, his ideology, his belief system and the philosophy of his life, it is important to seek the answers to these two questions-

- Where does he come from?
- Where is he trying to reach?

Answer to the first question is rather too simple. The major parts of Chatterjee's literature draw from his firsthand experiences; they are the

bits and snatches of his own life. The autobiographical element legitimizes his novels and lends a distinct value to the details provided. The great resemblance between the most endearing of all his heroes Agastya Sen and author Chatterjee is unmistakable. To begin with, both are urban, anglicized Bengali, Post Graduate in English from Delhi University and like Agastya, Chatterjee is also an IAS. When Chatterjee joined the IAS in 1983, almost the same time when Agastya became an IAS, he was posted in a small township Chandrapur, which he describes as simply 'awful',^{iv} the sentiment shared by Agastya when he is posted to Madna. Chatterjee admits that he got the idea for the book while watching his elder brother and his friends join the IAS. In an interview given to Sandip Roy-Chowdhury in Indo-American magazine *India Currents*, Chatterjee reveals that watching his brother and his friends 'set out to the back of beyond, he was intrigued by this strange arranged marriage of two Indias.'^v But it is the impression that Chatterjee himself gathered during his period of training that forms the frame work of *English, August*.

Here it becomes essential to study in detail the formative process sensibility, his perceptiveness, his sharp responses, which lend a distinct color and shape to his literature. Chatterjee is a 'Stephenian', a product of St Stephens College, New Delhi, the alumni of which boast of illustrious Indo-Anglican authors Shashi Tharoor, Allan Sealy, Amitav Ghosh, all risen in 1980s. Chatterjee owes much of his mindset and awareness to his St. Stephens days, and the same reflects in his fiction. According to Lola Chatterjee, the reason why the students of Chatterjee's batch became famous authors is due to the many common characteristics they shared. They came from privileged middle class elite families, got educated in well-established institutes, took humanities or social sciences as their subjects and parents interfered least in their lives. These young men were able to enjoy varied cultural life, they listened to Hindustani classical music, saw plays of dramatists like Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar, excellent translations of Russian or European plays in Hindi or Urdu, absurd or existentialist drama in English. These delights were blended with music of

western pop music groups. They preferred new casualness in dress which was jeans, and above all they differed to a great extent from past generations in many ways.

Another characteristic that Lola found common in this generation was their facility in using English, the result of what became kind of casual, 'laid-back' attitude to English language. They chose hybrid language over correct usage to express the multifaceted experiences of times. A mixture of two kinds of syntax and many kinds of vocabulary characterizes the language of these authors. These authors were also affected by Vietnam War and emergency in India which triggered off a serious appraisal of political situation in India. These qualities converged to produce a set of talented young men- clever, knowledgeable, comfortable and easy with their hybrid culture and language, but above all, concerned about their society and its problems. This very trend-wave or socio-cultural environment moulded Upamanyu Chatterjee and his thinking.

Agastya directly gets his laid back attitude, taste in music, choice in reading and his informed observations on the state of affairs of his time from Chatterjee. Rukun Advani also identifies Agastya Sen, like his creator, as 'quintessentially the Stephenian graduate,'^{vi} while S. Prasannarajan points out the resemblances, "What he has in common with Agastya is the profession-and the wit, that Joycean sense of the joke."^{vii} Hence, it can be convincingly established that the experiences of Agastya on his first encounter with vast Indian bureaucracy in Madna are the reflections of Chatterjee's own.

His second novel *The Last Burden*^{viii} also draws to some extent from his own family. Pradeep Trikha finds *The Last Burden* as the record of relationship between mother and son and believes that the presence of some autobiographical elements intensifies this 'important relationship.'^{ix} Chatterjee's mother died during the writing of this novel and Trikha opines that Chatterjee finds 'objective correlative in Jamun's grief.'^x Chatterjee himself confessed that the death of his mother moved him greatly. The description of Urmila's hospital room is the image of the room where his

own mother was kept. However, how far the fear, dilemma and predicament of Agastya or the experience of sour relationships and entangled lives can be attributed to Chatterjee and his personal life, it is not possible to ascertain with surety. Chatterjee admits to drawing upon his own experiences for his first book, *English, August*, but denies that it is autobiographical. His third novel *The Mammaries of the Welfare State*^{xi} too is a record of impressions he received being an insider in the administrative set-up. The novel shapes his anger and discontent at the rampant corruption and malfunctioning he found inside the bureaucratic set-up.

Further, there is a presence of strong streak of modernist phenomenon called *avant-garde*^{xii} in Chatterjee. These *avant-garde* (advance guards) violate accepted conventions or art and social discourse and set out to create new artistic forms and styles. They also introduce hitherto forbidden and neglected subject matter. The style and mode of discourse in *The Last Burden* and *The Mammaries of the Welfare State*, and the choice of subject which veers towards pornography in the *Weight Loss*^{xiii} conform to the *avant-garde* school. The *avant-garde* artists prominently find themselves 'alienated' from the established order, and their conspicuous aim is 'to shock the sensibilities of the conventional reader and to challenge the norms and pieties of the dominant bourgeois culture.'^{xiv}

Having established the autobiographical element in Chatterjee's novels, the sense of alienation of the protagonists Agastya, Jamun and Bhola can again be attributed to author Chatterjee, who is rather shy and reticent in personal life. There is a certain level of reluctance to grab the limelight or to come into focus, the fact which has been often disclosed in his interviews. Vijay Nambisan, who interviewed Chatterjee for *The Hindu*, discloses,

"His capacity for silence - his genius for remaining aloof in the face of gibes at his or Agastya Sen's Englishness - is unnerving. With the three weapons of an artist (according to Joyce), silence, exile and cunning, Chatterjee has his armory well stocked."^{xv}

Despite being reserved in nature, his writings speak volumes about his attitude and it can be claimed

without doubt that this shyness does not extend to his works when it comes to expressing his unconventional views on the topics like family bonding, marriage, sex etc.

Besides drawing from personal experiences, Chatterjee writes about issues that alarm him majorly and feels that they should be brought out in open and addressed. The sensitive and thoughtful author in Chatterjee is definitely not ignorant to the side effects of the escalating consumerism and competition telling its effects on the middle class society in the form of rising greed and double standards, breakdown of bonds, degeneration of values and disintegration of nuclear families. He is equally agitated by the lack of governmental will and concern for the truly needy ones, the non-existence of professional ethics, and above all increasing selfishness in all quarters of life. Moreover, it is to a large extent his own pessimism that captures more of negativity and oddity than positivity or constructiveness. In the line of another bureaucrat turned writer Sudhanshu Mohanty, who has also laid bare the concept of 'India Corruption Shining',^{xvi} Chatterjee is dispositionally inclined towards the systemic rot. There is a distinctive resonance of these issues in his fiction which are infused with wry wittiness, satire, sarcasm, humour and playfulness. Nevertheless, the anger, sadness, gloom, frustration and cynicism at the general deterioration rampant all around is unmistakable. It is quite visibly hidden behind the ostensible playful and satirical mode of expression, too clear to be veiled.

It would now be appropriate to seek the answer to the second question: where does his literature lead to? What does it aim at? It definitely leads towards raising some very serious and topical questions which are off and on discussed on various forms but the answer to which is still not reached at. The gloomy Indian socio-political conditions bother every sensible person today and give rise to inquiries of modern youth like Agastya who is perpetually caught in the predicament- 'to be or not be.' Uncertainties and confusion within and without hold more relevance for writer Chatterjee.

These are also the queries of a common man trying to run a family who has to heed to the

demands made on him on daily basis. The inevitable discord and frictions caused by flared up temperaments and unfulfilled expectations often lead to such damaging situations that are often the points of no-reversal. The befuddlement of Burfi in *The Last Burden* is very much the same when he asks-

"One's diverse allegiances yank one- at the same time- in so many different directions. I mean, to whom is one *first* pledged? Is there any *one* to whom one is more beholden than to others? Parent? Or guardian? An aya? Spouse? Or one's favourite floosie? Or one's child? But which of them? One's first son or fourth daughter? Tchah."^{xvii}

Again, Chatterjee calls into question an equally complex yet universal notion concerning close relationships, arising especially in dysfunctional families, that says 'proximity breeds contempt.' He makes hopeless yet poignant enquires into issues such as why can one not be humane and loving to one's near and dear ones while they are alive, why does one realizes the worth of bonds only when they cease to exist.

Further, these queries are also of an indignant spectator of the drama of the vast Indian welfare state, the governance. In *English, August*, he highlights the sad reality of the job in civil services that adds to the restlessness and confusion of Agastya. The 'futility' of the coveted bureaucratic position looms large in the narrative. In his essay "Rambling at Fifty," he discloses his concern as to 'how does one get the good men, the best men, in any system to govern the country?'^{xviii} These queries also show the displeasure of the bureaucrat Chatterjee, who is perhaps too exasperated by the absurdity of 'Nutsyanyaya' all around him. Thus we see Agastya grapple with various 'chiseled, honed and polished questions' on various such subjects in *The Mammaries of the Welfare State*.

Out of all these schemes, plans, projects and programmes of ours that look so snazzy on paper, who benefits on the end? After every bugger down the line, that is, has wolfed down his cut? It's almost always someone familiar with the system, isn't it?

He's benefited before from some other programme, so he knows how those dreadful forms are to be filled up, which twenty-three documents are required, whom to bribe to get what faked... (179-180)

Apart from these queries, Chatterjee's literature leads to exposing the general predicament arising of contemporary conditions. This includes the dilemma of a de-centered youth caught in the mesh of metro and micro India; of society trying to cope with changing times and the changing notions of familial bonds; it is the delimitation of the largest democracy, the bureaucracy of which has not yet delivered and is still to prove the importance of its existence. Above all, it exposes the dilemma of a common man caught in the shifting paradigm of the socio-political and socio-cultural matrix of present day life. He places the so-called modernity or westernization and Indian tradition and culture on the same plane for our examination. He then seems to be asking whether this attitude of modernity as embodied in western outlook on life has proved to be useful in solving the problems arising out of modern Indian situation. Mogaral, who finds in Chatterjee a representative of 'urban novel,' sums it up appropriately:

For one, both the novels he has written reveal anxiety about the modern Indian identity. There is also concern for needs covering one's cultural roots and past and to come to terms with the post colonial status. Taken together, *The Last Burden* and *English, August* gives an account of the genealogy of modern Indian sensibility: its roots in modern domesticity and proliferation via bureaucracy.^{xix}

Chatterjee's literature enforces the necessity of introspection and retrospection as the need of the hour. His vision raises the demand of taking stock of the situation with an urgency of crisis. It insists on people and society in general to call in question their attitude towards one another, towards the nation and ponder whether it will pay well in future or be useful for their progeny, and if not, then it's time to initiate change, on personal, societal and system level. His literature dwells upon the post

modern Indian reality that is veering towards the dismal and decay and his wry and witty approach to serious issues is meant to shake the people out of their smugness and middle-class complacency so that they are forced to get up and act.

Notes

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^v Sandip Roy Chowdhury, "Born Again: The second coming of Upamanyu Chatterjee's novel, *English, August*," IndiaCurrents 26 Jul 2006, 30 Jun 2008 <http://www.indiacurrents.com/news/view_article.html>

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^{vii} S. Prasannarajan, "August Returns," rev. of The Mammaries of the Welfare State, by Upamanyu Chatterjee, india-today.com 04 Dec. 2000, 10 Dec 2006

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^{ix} Pradeep Trikha, "Emotional Bonds in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *The Last Burden*," Indian Literature Today Vol I, Ed. R. K. Dhawan (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1994) 123.

^x Trikha 123.

^{xi} Upamanyu Chatterjee, The Mammaries of the Welfare State, (New Delhi: Penguin Books (India), 2000)

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^{xv} Upamanyu Chatterjee, interview with Vijay
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^{xvi} Sudhansu Mohanty, Babulog - Vignettes of Indian
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^{xvii} The Last Burden, 245

^{xviii} Upamanyu Chatterjee, "Rambling at Fifty," India
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^{xix} Namratha Mogaral, "Confronting Modernity and
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