

“Quest for Self-realisation”

from the novel “*English August: An Indian Story*” by Upamanyu Chatterjee.

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Abstract:

This paper studies the continuous struggle of an individual to achieve Self Realization. Through the analysis of the character August, protagonist of the novel “*English August: An Indian story*”, this struggle is studied with minute psychological observation. The protagonist of Upamanyu Chatterjee, August, is a representation of the perplexed youth of the globalised era. What exactly is a true life moment, and how do you define one? And when does our true life begin? In order to find the answers to these questions, he goes back in time and selects a few threads from previous existence, known as nostalgia, a collection of memories packaged as joyful experiences. Gradually he comes to know that his life is rootless, he is living in the past, and he is ignoring the present time by not utilizing the position of an IAS officer. He travels from ignorance to knowledge at the end.

Key words: Quest for self realization- rootlessness- aimlessness -dissatisfied- nostalgia- ignorance- purpose of life- unsubstantial - knowledge-modern man- disillusionment with his job- self-motive - service to people- come to terms with oneself.

Introduction

Upamanyu Chatterjee was born in 1959 and is a retired Indian civil servant and author. The novels *English, August: An Indian Story, The Last Burden, The Mammaries of the Welfare State, and Weight Loss* are among his works. In 2008, he received ‘the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres’ for his literary contributions. Chatterjee was born in Patna, Bihar, in 1959. After attending Delhi University and graduating from St. Stephens College, he joined the Indian Administrative Service in 1983. In 1990, he was appointed writer-in-residence at the University

of Kent. In 1998, he was appointed director of India's Ministry of Human Resource Development.

English August: An Indian Story was initially published by Faber and Faber Limited, London, in 1988, and later by 'Penguin Books India' in India in 2002.

Anderson Tepper comments in *Time Out New York* that English, "August (protagonist of *English August: An Indian Story*) Struck a chord with a generation of young writers wrestling with the messy sprawl of modern south Asia. It's also a novel with resonating concern about the meaning of maturity in the modern era... American readers should identify with the brainy, sarcastic and slightly confused protagonist of English, August as he struggles to find a purpose in a rapidly changing world." 1

The noted writer Amit Chaudhary asserted, "English August is one of the most important novels in Indian writing in English but not for the unusual reason. Indeed it's at war with 'importance' and is one of the few Indian English novels in the last two decades genuinely and wonderfully impelled by irreverence and aimlessness. It's this acutely intelligent conflation of self discovery with the puncturing of solemnity that makes the book not only a significant work, but a much loved one." 2

The protagonist of the novel "*English August: An Indian story*", August is a representation of the perplexed youth of the globalised era. What exactly is a true life moment, and how do you define one? And when does our true life begin? In order to find the answers to these questions, he goes back in time and selects a few threads from previous existences, known as nostalgia, a collection of memories packaged as joyful experiences. Initially he lives in this illusion.

According to C. Sengupta, Upamanyu Chatterjee's maiden novel, '*English, August: An Indian Story*' is a subtle metaphor of contemporary youth's quest for self realization. The novel describes a journey- sometimes pathetic, sometimes humorous, and even ridiculous- a journey from rootlessness to maturity, a struggle to come to terms with oneself.

Agastya Sen, the protagonist of '*English August: An Indian Story*', is unable to enjoy the position of an IAS, comforts of the status but thinks of past life all the time. He wants to quit the job to join his relative in publishing business. His uncle says about him, "You are interested in nothing and you think that is virtue."3. Agastya observes "I don't want any challenges or responsibility or anything; all I want is to be happy" 4. His father also tried to convince him by

pointing possibilities of knowledge of new world. He wrote in one letter, “Your job will provide an immense variety and will give you glimpse of other situations and existences which might initially prove startling. Your dissatisfaction now seems to wear me out...But ogu remember that madna is not an align place. You must give in 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.”⁵ Agatya replies, “I am sorry but what you read into my last letter was true. I just can’t get used to the job and the place. I’m wasting my time here and not enjoying the wasting. This can be a sickening feeling.”⁶

Even when there is a wonderful time in their lives right now, they choose to ignore it, dwell in the past, and continue to hope that something amazing will occur in the future. They barely give the present moment, which is genuinely in their hands, a second thought. Either they reside in the present or the future. Agastya Sen is also no exception to this.

The life in Madna for Agastya Sen is very comfortable. Being an IAS officer he is more privileged now when compared to his past life. All material comforts like good house, car, servants, delicious food, marijuana, music tapes, even people who provide porn cassettes secretly. Above all he used to do least work at office as his senior IAS officers pay no attention to train juniors. As per the present state of his mind, these are his priorities even when he is in Delhi. Surprisingly he is unable to enjoy the position of an IAS as well. His problem has to be examined from the Psychological realities of human beings.

“ He (Agastya) realized obscurely that he was to lead at least three lives in Madna, the official, with its social concomitance, the unofficial, which included boozing with Shankar and Sathe, and later, with Bhatia, and the secret, in the universe of his room, which encompassed jogging by moonlight . Each world was to prove educative, and the world beyond Madna was continually to interrupt and disturb him, through letters and the radio, and through ungovernable memories. When he was leading one Madna-life, the other two seemed completely unsubstantial.”⁷

Gradually, at the end of the book, he come to the realization that if we can let go of the past and the future, the present moment, with all of its immeasurable beauty, will seem like eternity to us. Agastya identifies that accepting the present situation as it is in Madna is

necessary. This acceptance gives meaning to life if he serves people by using the range of opportunities given by the position of an IAS. After a few months in Madna, he begins to show signs of maturity, and when, in the second stage of his training, he is posted to a remote tribal block called Jompanna as a Block Development Officer, he excels and assumes all of the duties of an IAS Officer. He genuinely shocks the readers by valiantly and surprisingly resolving the village of Chipanti's water shortage issues. He finally decides to give up on the idea of leaving the IAS service and tries to adjust to his new job and surroundings.

Adjusting and keeping the mind in present situations of life is learnt by Agastya. This living in the right now, is beyond time. Earlier he used to live in past experiences of Delhi life. He spends less time in present. The illusion of Past time or future time steals his present time. After self realization the illusion of time dissolves. He enjoys the bliss of the no-time, no-space paradigm which allows one to exist continuously for months at a time while engaging in profound meditation and fully breathing in the present moment. This stage, which is described as a vastly happy condition of egolessness and timelessness, is mentioned in all philosophies, scriptures, and even scientific theories. Time fades into nothingness when "I" vanishes. Then, for the first time, we catch a glimpse of God and our own soul. **Selfless service to people gives joy from within, which is an end to selfish motives and urges.** Agastya Sen attained this joy at the end by serving people by utilizing the position of an IAS.

The book contrasts Baba Ramanna's unselfish service to humanity with the careless behaviour of the officials. Agastya visits the home for lepers run by Baba Ramanna. He was astounded to witness the attentive care provided to the lepers and other outcasts. He was shocked to learn that the home operated freely and effectively without receiving any government funding. He understands the importance of helping people. He leaves the home calm, steadfast, and determined to carry out his duty with sincerity. The encounter helps Agastya to develop good habits and partially clears his disillusionment with his job.

In the Bhagavad-Gita, Lord Krishna speaks to Arjuna about the '*maya*' (8) of this world, which is what gives rise to our perceptions of time, attachment, and the entirety of the matrix. People who have overcome all of life's paradoxes are able to find me and partake in my happy condition. The philosophy of the Bhagavad-Gita is reflected in this novel. The bewildered

Arjuna in Kurushetra can be paralleled to the perplexed heroes of literature. He had the good fortune to hear Lord Krishna impart the knowledge of the ultimate truth. Similar to the young protagonist in the novel, *English, August*, they are lucky to be given the most complete understanding of themselves and self realization at the conclusion of the stories after regaining that awareness in order to guide their trip beyond time. This is true of Hindu philosophy as well.

According to Jesus Christ, in the experience of enlightenment, there is no time at all, neither past time or nor future time. Beyond time and space, is what it is. Agastya tried to find an answer to his rootlessness, day dreaming, thinking of the past, idling in the room, watching lizards, and racing across the room. Exercise provides a relief from the absurdity of his daily routine. The writer says in the interview about Agastya,

“Running felt splendid, clockwork movement, the crisscross of arm and leg, rhythm and balance, the steady, healthy painting, illusion that his body (Agastya’s) was used well. The mind wandered pleasantly, yet not into chaos because the physical strain provided the leash” 9

Before the realization of Self, Agastya Sen used to spend his present time by uncontrolled thinking. On the contrary, there is widespread agreement among thinkers that there won't be any idea of time if you don't think. Because love is not thinking but the cessation of mind, a moment of love is also a moment of timelessness. In a moment of meditation, time stands still. To understand our eternal inner essence, where thought and space don't exist, it takes a journey from mind to no mind. Through meditation, one can come to understand that the self-luminous power inside is the only thing that is. That being is the origin of everything and the catalyst for all causes, including thought and feelings. Time is the beginning, but the individual soul is the finish. You have arrived, yet this arrival is returning to your own nature and not to something new when you reach a point where you are unable to perceive time or space. We will achieve what was already given to us and has always been ours. This is actually beyond time, a condition of Self- Realization. This realization is when one is deeply relaxed, completely silent, and outside of time, space, and the mind, giving them a glimpse of eternity. And all of a sudden, everything is available. All heroes' journeys thus come to an end in timelessness or beyond time.

At the end, Agastya has a sense of duty. In his own way, he attempts to alleviate the issues on his block. At the conclusion of the book, he has changed his ways. He has transformed

from a gloomy, brooding, and nostalgic individual to a duty-conscious and upbeat one. The author illustrates the protagonist's brighter future by tracing his journey from misery to happiness and peace. This demonstrates that bureaucracy is not inherently negative. Due to bureaucrats like Agastya, there is still a shred of hope.

These protagonists of Chatterjee represent any person who travels from ignorance to knowledge, beyond a period in the realms of Self or inner world, at any time in his life journey. As a result, his novels are always popular with readers worldwide, and Upamanyu Chatterjee is recognised as a classic author both in the field of English literature and around the globe.

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