

Existentialism in Upamanyu Chatterjee's Novel 'English August'

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Existentialism is a philosophical movement which emphasizes on individual existence, freedom and choice. For existentialists, there is no single theory that can contain the whole of the experience of human life. Existentialism is a philosophical movement which claims that individual human beings create the meanings and essence of their own lives.

Jean Paul Sartre who has taken existentialist's revolt to the foundation of existentialism that we mean that man is nothing else but which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism. By essence Sartre means what has been Sartre calls its man's past. Man first of all encounters himself. Meaning behind existence is to establish value. Each man makes his essence as he lives.

There are two kinds of entity in existence-

Being- in- themselves

and

Being- for- themselves

↓
Non –conscious things which
exist independently of any
observer.

↓
conscious beings whose
consciousness entirely constitute all
the things in the world as different
from other things. (Sartre ix).

Upamanyu Chatterjee is the unparalleled novelist of Indian society. His works are very fictional and flexible. In his all works, one work is very different and clear with others i.e. English August. Upamanyu Chatterjee has depicted the absurdity of life. The miseries and disease of life presented in his novels very vividly and vertically.

His debut novel *English August*, in fact, is the beginning of the journey of Upamanyu Chatterjee as a writer who has explored the ordeals of modern life philosophically. When we

read the novel we might be swayed by the humour and irreverent language of the novel. On the surface reading it may look like a narrative which gives the sense of humorous and satiric aspects of literary sensibilities but digging slightly underneath, we find that the novelist is in fact seriously involved in the narrative that makes sense of life from the philosophical perspectives that have been propounded, propagated and preached by many existentialist philosophers of the twentieth century.

This is very funny novel but a kindness one as well that this book displays a world rarely seen in modern Indian writing revealing a detailed knowledge of the particular activity that can express our personal experience. In the novel all characters are surrounded to each other. There are number of parts that commit him to do anything. He does not consider himself too seriously for example- marijuana, masturbation, day dreams and Marcus Aurelius' for meditation. Although Tonic a cousin of Agastya, is an idiot, who had with great tactlessness refused to publish a book of Pultukaku's articles on something called 'The Indian Renewal' Ghoshal and Multani provoked description of Agastya's background as the civil services examination, that the nature of his job and his reactions about to Madna but when we analyses the life of Agastya we find that life is full of mortal and immortal with a pathetic consideration. The novel can be read at two levels- first on the surface level, the book is a commentary on the Administrative service of India and secondly the deeper level it is a frank discussion of the predicament, although others level also in the novel describe sometime pathetic, sometime humorous as well as even ridiculous. Agastya is basically unwilling and unable to commit himself fully to do anything but Chatterjee presents this act very sympathetically. Although Chatterjee tone fits well with his laid back as a protagonist. The world of bureaucrats and business Administrative to touch each other and both invites satirical treatment as for as the book finally leaves us wandering motivated.

Upamanyu Chatterjee's first novel *English August* is a narrative which deals with the life of Agastya, an I.A.S officer. Agastya's first posting is in Madna, considered to be one of the hottest places in India, like a dot in the vast Indian hinterland. He has to commence his training as an I.A.S officer. The Indian Administrative Service is at the top of the hierarchy in Indian bureaucracy, "the best job possible, in the Indian context" (51), with the I.A.S officer "like a king in ancient India, walking incognito among his subjects" (111). The I.A.S officer's help in the development of the country and as the collector Srivastava say, "If the country is moving it is because of us only" (58).

An I.A.S officer is supposed to comprehend life intellectually and rationally because the selection of an I.A.S is based on the parameters of logic, rationality and commonsensical approach to life. Agastya is selected for this job on the basis of such qualities. But when we meet Agastya for the first time in the summer infected Madnapur district of West Bengal, we find that the so called attributes of the rationalistic and practical, self-do not touch him at all. The essentialist nature of human self is only mocked at and derided by all the actions, thoughts and perceptions of Agastya. He looks at his own life from the point of view of daily existence. The immediacy of existence is more significant to Agastya than the dry essentialist gospels of religious or moralistic teachings.

When the novel opens, Agastya and his friend Dhruvo are parting from each other and the description of this parting is so drab and the discussion between these two friends is described not by some sense or meaning but in terms of the effects of marijuana-

“Not that parting was too agonizing and that he couldn’t bear to leave the car, but that marijuana caused acute lethargy” (1).

Madna is described by the novelist as the hottest place in India. To beat the sun the residents there tie a towel or a scarf on their heads. Agastya finds this very funny and he himself ties a towel around his head and gets himself photographed. This attitude of Agastya to reduce the serious life threatening problems to such frivolity gives a feeling to the reader that life is absurd and meaningless. The rationality of life, the logic of life makes no sense to a person who is faced with the nature in its red teeth and nails. When Agastya seriously thinks of the heat, his remarks-

.here, stay indoors as much as you can, if possible turn nocturnal. The world outside is not worth journeying out for, and any beauty out of doors is visible only in the dark, or in the half- light of dawn (8).

And administration is an intricate business, and a young officer who lacks initiative cannot really be trained in its artifices. There is very little that he can learn from watching someone else; Agastya learnt nothing. For a very short while he worried about his ignorance, and then decided to worry about it properly when others discovered it (10).

These lines show the conflict in Agastya’s mind about trying to find meanings and the prevalence of meaninglessness in life, the conflict between the expectations of rationality and the prevalence of irrationality in life, the conflict between the expectation of certainty and the

prevalence of uncertainty of life. The paradox of life-the abstract high ideas and morality with the reality of concrete immoral life with crude physical realities is suggested throughout the novel. Upamanyu Chatterjee has excelled as a novelist interpreting the real life lived by the human beings the life which is governed, regulated and controlled by the everyday existence of human beings. He has used the backdrop of Indian administrative system to show human life in its most basic form, striped of all essence. He depicts the life of Indians as surrounded by and regulated by the absurdities of Indian administration. The picture that Chatterjee presents is that both the administrators and the administrated are involved in the absurdities and irrationalities.

The existentialist philosophy of life makes us understand that it is difficult to easily achieve any real aims of life. We live for the trivial things. Upamanyu Chatterjee depicts a vivid picture of trivial life. He makes it evident that the tragedy lies not so much in the triviality of life as in the knowledge and awareness of this triviality.

Upamanyu Chatterjee himself writes through the character of Agastya's father:

His father had said that, most unexpectedly, at their last meeting, three weeks before Madna. 'Most of us, Ogu, live with a vague dissatisfaction, if we are lucky. Living as we do, upon us is imposed a particular rhythm-birth, education, a job, marriage, then birth again, but we all have minds, don't we? (34).

Almost all of Chatterjee's protagonists seem to be engulfed by this state of corruption, exploitation, indifference and snobbery. In Madna the human conditions are always in a distressful and disgusting state.

We find a touch of the 'Stream of Consciousness' when Agastya goes into his past, three years ago in college days. One of the themes in Upamanyu Chatterjee's fiction is his derisive attitude towards human relationships, especially man-woman relationship. Upamanyu Chatterjee considers human relationship to be based on the existential contingencies of life. Man-woman relationships in the traditions of essentialist philosophy are considered to be defined by purity and morality. Upamanyu Chatterjee depicts his characters, both men and woman, as struggling with their immediate lives. In this immediate life, it is not possible to make sense of life beyond the immediate needs of life. Women or men in the word of Upamanyu Chatterjee's fiction react to the presence of each other in a crude yet natural way. It may offend the moral sensibility of the readers but the novelist chooses to be a naturalist in his portrayals of his characters. One example of such portrayals is Narsimbham's writing of a

note to Agastya in his college days about the crude physical attributes of their lady teacher. When Agastya visits Mr. Srivastava's house (The D.M. of Madna) he looks at Mrs. Srivastava with all the frivolity that a man can have towards female. His assessment of Mrs. Srivastava's personality is more of physical attributes than of moral, spiritual or rational.

The novel *English August* is a real picture of actual life of Indian administrative officers. When Agastya spends his time with Mr. Srivastava, he comes to know how an administrator deals properly with each case and the District Magistrate of Madna. Agastya is highly impressed by Srivastava's attitude towards his subordinates. He is also influenced by his strong confidence. Agastya tells him that he feels discomfort with Madna's regional language and Srivastava at once orders Joshi, "Joshi Saab, arrange for some kind of a language tutor for Mr. Sen" (16). At another place he rings the bell and orders Chidambaram, to get him 'District Gazetteer' Srivastava informs Agastya that he will be Block Development Officer for the last two months of his training and before that he will be attached to various District officers. The first three weeks he will be with the Collectorate. And during the first week Agastya sits with him to grasp the work of the collector. After all, in a few months he will be Assistant Collector; doing in a sub-division what he (Srivastava) does at the district level. Meanwhile Srivastava tells Agastya that there is an integration gathering at the Gandhi hall at twelve fifteen. When Agastya becomes curious, Srivastava depicts the past and cause of this gathering and he also describes Madna's social-political pictures through an administrator's eyes. He tells him that there was a big Hindu- Muslim riot here few months ago. "It surprised everyone because Madna has never been communally sensitive. The last Collector, Antony, was transferred, I think, because of the riots" (20). He continues that the politicians were actually behind the riots. He abuses politicians and tells Agastya that he will really know what they are like when he functions as Block Development Officer. Therefore, in order to take some precaution, he forms an integration committee which meets once in a month. "Both Hindu and Muslim goondas get together and eat and waste time" (20). But Srivastava gives strong reasons in favour of this Integration gathering. He says, "It helps in many ways. We find out from them what's really happening in the district-gossip, the things that our police and Revenue officials won't tell us because they themselves might be involved" (22). His voice turns dictatorial –

Effective administration really means meeting the people, and showing them that the Collector and the SP of a district are not

uppity and high-handed, but like meeting them. This is India, bhai, an independent country, and not the Raj, we are servants of the people (22-23).

Thus every action of Srivastava is not only the experience and education for Agastya's training but also reflects the ways of Indian Administrative Service which are untouched by many other great novelists.

In this era of globalisation, the material things instead of people have become the essential part of social machinery. In this modern materialistic civilization, politics, economy and administration have become parts of the social system life. His novels bind his readers to this administrative social chain.

In fact in his creative works, Upamanyu Chatterjee is always impersonal and objective as a scientist. In this way Upamanyu Chatterjee produces very useful messages to his readers through his fiction because his crises portrayal of human beings completely bares the existential during his writings.

In *English August* the characters and incidents are suggestive of Upamanyu Chatterjee's attitude towards life. Even small characters like Shiva give us an idea of about Upamanyu thinks of human life. Shiva tells Agastya that Mr. Srivastava, the Collector was having an affair with BDO and she committed suicide when she could not marry him. Shiva also tells him about Shanker, and his younger brother. Shiva tells Agastya that Shankar is a deputy engineer in Minor irrigation department. He says that to get a cut in the extra money he acts like a servant to his younger brother. Sometimes when Shankar is out, he even sleeps with Shankar's wife. Agastya find this outrageous:

He is lying, of course, thought Agastya, or maybe he really is insane. Perhaps it was the form of insanity that was precluded by extreme boredom. Or perhaps Shiv just liked fantasy, because he found it both impossible and unnecessary to express accurately the mild horror of the tedium of his life (30).

When the novel ends, Agastya is still trying to make sense of his life. At the end of his training year in Madna, he writes to Dhruvo, "I've become your American, taking a year off after college to discover himself" (288). It is indicative of the fact that the quest is on- there are moments of doubts, and of discovery, and along the way, amidst all the complexities. He

seems to have picked some germs of learning. The way he solves Jompanna's water shortage problem is a pointer to the fact that willingly or unwillingly, we have to accept the realities and of like and become a part of the system, playing the role assigned to us. As Agastya observes:

Today I have got myself out of all my perplexities, or rather, I have got the perplexities out of myself- for they were not without, but within, they lay in my own outlook. He smiled at the page, and thought, He lied, but he lied so well, this sad Roman who had also looked for happiness in living more than one life, and had failed, but with such grace (288).

The whole novel seems to suggest that there are no so called higher aims of life but only the trivialities like sex and drugs. In the true sense of Sartrean philosophy, his life moves from nothingness to nothingness. The existential condition of human life is very well brought out by the novelist. Thus English August wear the crown of reality because the novel is so natural and definitely true. It is an Indian story.

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