

CULTURAL ALIENATION IN UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE'S ENGLISH, AUGUST: AN INDIAN STORY

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Abstract

The theme of exile and alienation is prevalent throughout twentieth-century writing, to the extent that it is often referred to as the literature of exile. This text reflects the overall sense of disappointment, challenges, and profound spiritual isolation experienced by individuals in the post-war generations. It highlights the feeling of being insignificant and alienated in the vast cosmos. Upamanyu Chatterjee's novel "English, August: An Indian Story" explores identity in a postmodern culture. It complicates this topic by involving the protagonist in a complex network of conflicting and contradictory experiences and behaviors. Chatterjee presents a nuanced perspective on post-colonial society, where exile and alienation appear to be unavoidable aspects of human behavior.

Keywords: Alienation, Torment, Tribal, Culture, Displacement

The concept of Alienation is prevalent in much of modern literature, with one of its central focuses being the exploration of potential harmony between individuals and their circumstances. This issue is of immediate importance in all post-colonial literature, as they are the product of an unequal interaction between a violent and exploitative imperialistic culture. This dynamic has led to significant displacement, dispossession, and dislocation in contemporary societies. These effects are observed in various social, cultural, linguistic, and geographical domains. Consequently, a crisis of identity has emerged, accompanied by a pervasive sense of Alienation.

The main character in English, August and The Mammaries of Welfare State, experiences an unavoidable feeling of isolation caused by a strong recognition of his colonial heritage. Agastya Sen is experiencing a sense of estrangement due to his displacement and dislocation in Madna. He is socially isolated in his community. Upamanyu Chatterjee portrays Agastya Sen as an estranged hero to illustrate the challenges he faces due to his isolation. Hence, there is a strategy to investigate and elucidate Agastya's psychograph to determine the factors behind his feeling of estrangement. The main character in the novels English, August, and The Mammaries of Welfare State experiences an unavoidable feeling of Alienation caused by his profound understanding of

his colonial heritage. Agastya Sen is experiencing a sense of estrangement due to his displacement and dislocation in Madna. He is socially isolated in his community.

Upamanyu Chatterjee portrays Agastya Sen as an estranged hero to illustrate the challenges he faces due to his isolation. Hence, there is a strategy to investigate and elucidate Agastya's psychograph to determine the factors behind his feeling of estrangement. Agastya is an unconventional bureaucrat who makes no effort to conform to the norm. The trainee is bewildered by anything he does. Nevertheless, he is eager to discover significance and attain a clear purpose in his life. Individuals have yet to embrace their uniqueness successfully and instead desire to be a fusion of Western culture. The novel *English, August* is narrated in a seriocomic manner, with situational humor stemming from absurdity and disorientation. Upamanyu Chatterjee adeptly blends elements of absurdity with the character's emotional experiences in the narrative. Although he displays affection, he is uncompromising in his portrayal of modern India. Agastya and his companions are both attracted to and concerned about the increasing prevalence of Western culture. However, while working as a trainee in Madna, Agastya starts to discern what holds significance and captivates his attention. There are no definitive truths or certainties, but there is a rising recognition of the importance of being true to oneself, establishing a solid foundation, and ultimately striving for happiness. As a trainee at Madna, Agastya engages in sexual fantasies, appreciates music and literature, enjoys wine and marijuana, and practices masturbation. An Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer is an essential and integral part of the bureaucratic system, playing a crucial role in serving the nation. Prioritizing preserving the Indian Administrative Service's integrity and dignity takes precedence over all other matters.

But Agastya feels apathy for it and misses his vocation completely. On the very first day in Madna he feels being fucked like the fallen Adam. The filthy food and mosquito-infested atmosphere at the Rest House suffocate him, as if these factors contaminate his psyche as much as excrement does. Agastya is now unmarried, however, he falsely claims to be married when interacting with people. When questioned by Deputy Collector Mr. Agarwal regarding his spouse, Agastya responds :“She is in England She's English, anyway, but she's gone there for a cancer operation. She has cancer of breast” (13). In addition, he informs the District Inspector of Land Records that his spouse is a Norwegian Muslim. He unabashedly boasts about his parents' involvement in the inaugural Indian mission to Antarctica without any sense of shame.

Agastya derides and belittles everyone and everything in his vicinity. His westernized influence frequently disrupts his superiors, subordinates, and colleagues, indicating a strong aversion to his work. He disregards regulations and violates cultural norms by making offensive and explicit remarks of a sexual nature. Occasionally, he has feelings of sadness, deep thought, and fluctuating emotions. In Madna, he encounters a feeling of surrealism and displacement. Deep in

contemplation, Agastya asks himself, “I don’t look like a bureaucrat, what am I doing here. I should have been a photographer, or a makes of ad films, something like that, shallow and urban” (EA 13). He considers himself alien living in a misfit world, and does not enjoy the role he has earned for himself by virtue of his competitive qualification.

The circumstances surrounding him evoke a profound sense of displacement in Madna. He experiences unease and doubt at his incapacity to integrate into village life, which becomes apparent on his train travel from Delhi to Madna. Agastya Sen, born to a father of Bengali Hindu descent and a mother of Goanese Christian descent, symbolizes the infiltration of Western civilization into the local Indian society. Cultural hybridization denotes the process of blending or merging different cultural elements:

The ways in which forms become separated from existing practices and recombine with new forms in new practices..... a reflexive relationship between the local and global produces the hybrid. The identities are not assimilated or altered independently, but instead elements of cultures are incorporated to create a new hybrid culture. (3)

Agastya lacks both physical strength and ambition, making him not a superhero. During a school composition, he expressed his aspiration that he wants "to be a domesticated male stray dog because they lived the best life. They were assured of food. . . . A stray dog was free; he slept a lot, barked unexpectedly and only when he wanted to and got a lot of sex” (EA 35). He remembers it from his time in Madna as a solution to his disordered thoughts. Agastya’s inclination towards becoming a dog reveals his irrational mindset. His existence in Madna is disconnected from his origins, depriving him of the opportunity to indulge in a continuous cycle of excessive drinking, drug use, and sexual activities in Delhi. However, this does not alleviate his feeling of being in exile, a general feeling of discontentment and disconnection. His senses are overwhelmed by dislocation. Upon entering the Indian Administrative Service, he aspires to discover significance and direction in his life. Dr. Upadhyay his college professor says “I’m happy for you Agastya you’re leaving for a more meaningful context” (24). But life in Madna is alienated and misplaced, feeling empty and lonely.

Agastya’s feelings of loneliness and misery seem insignificant, impolite, and empty in comparison to Dhruvo’s portrayal of boredom.: “All those expense accounts, and false-accented secretaries, and talk of New York and head office, and our man in Hong Kong, it’s just not real, it’s an imitation of something elsewhere” (EA 153). The novel *English August* explores the generational anguish of various characters, including Agastya, Madan, Dubey, Mohan, and Bhatia. Madan provides an eccentric description of his boredom, while his sister is captivated by the characteristics associated with English culture. Agastya is reluctant to confide his distress to his pals due to his sensitivity in recognizing that it is not particularly rare or entirely exceptional.

Similarly, many individuals in his vicinity also experience a comparable degree of incompetence in discovering purpose in life, and it is plausible that this inability is a prevalent characteristic among humans in contemporary society. Agastya's existential agony is not "a routine gesture of conformity to modern cynicism", as M.K. Naik points out in his comments on the novel. The genuineness of Agastya's delicate immobility within a confined and airtight environment evokes a genuine and identifiable character and sensitivity. Despite feeling dislocated and overwhelmed, Agastya manages to overcome his inertia and confront his anguish and lack of purpose. During moments of seriousness, he visits Multani's clinic. He observes the doctor's satisfaction and ambition, inspiring him to connect his life's struggles with concrete plans and a clear future.

While traveling to Baba Ramanna's Rehabilitation Home, he is greatly struck by the nobility and magnitude of the latter's dedication, which is evident in his remarkable accomplishment. He is captivated by the immense capacity of human potential energy and the ability to transform human vision into tangible achievements via careful planning and unwavering determination. The author observes the intense focus and dedication of Shankaran Karanth, also known as Baba Ramanna, who has abandoned his profitable medical career in Bangalore and relocated to a remote area to provide medical treatment to impoverished lepers. Significantly, Baba's trip has a beneficial impact on Agastya: "Later, mulling over his visit, Agastya envied Baba Ramanna most of all for knowing, when he had been merely Shankaran Karanth, how to master his future" (EA 237). Yet the reflection doesn't trigger a tremendous turn in him. As Murari Prasad states in his article "Reading Upamanyu Chatterjee's English, August" as

Contrary to Pranjape's point, by implication, nothing in Chatterjee's book suggest a "negative" attitude to India. It is a pity that Paranjape tars many Indo- Anglian novels with the same brush, ergo he contracts "the western disease" which he seeks to combat in his argument: the disease "to encapsulate the whole of Indian reality ". (89)

Agastya becomes cognizant of the destitution, suffering, oppression, and lack of necessities experienced by the tribal population. He ceases his procrastination and idleness. He resolves to cultivate empathy for the impoverished villagers. The beneficiaries find his effort to be encouraging and instill confidence. Nevertheless, he has become more earnest in his work and continues progressing. Agastya's initial display of resolute intent after being assigned as Assistant Collector in Koltanga quickly transitions back to his usual tendency to downplay and delight in petty matters. Meenakshi Raykar in an article "The Intellectual in a state of 'Anomy'" analyses:

Chinua Achebe's *No longer at Ease* and *English, August* point out that both the protagonists and their respective periods suffer from a state of 'anomy' –reminiscent of

Wole Soyinka's *The Season of Anomy*. 'Anomy', a word resurrected by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim from the Greek, denotes the condition of society which results from the disintegration of commonly accepted normative codes. (111)

Somewhat similar to the idea of alienation, it refers to a condition when an individual loses his traditional moorings and is prone to disorientation. Rukun Advani points from the book *The Fiction of St. Stephen's* as: "Agastya is quintessentially the Stephanian graduate extricating himself from the existential dilemmas that made thinking people clench their teeth when faced with the dreariness and mindlessness of the Indian bureaucracy" (12). Agastya saw himself as an outsider in the transaction governed by excessive greed. However, rather than dealing with the problem, Agastya and Obi absolve themselves of responsibility; both withdraw from their commitment and become introspective, as their education needs to provide them with the necessary guidance. Agastya is fully aware of his state of estrangement and actively struggles between his anglicized colonial self-image and his more profound native impulses. In any case, the text is ultimately reduced to an expression of conventional male anxiety. In order to achieve this objective, the narrative is extensively adorned with expressions that depict the predicaments faced by a disillusioned and confused young man. The main character lacks power and faces difficulties accepting his new experiences to discover a more cohesive identity. Agastya develops a fixation on exercising: "His exercise was something he felt he must hold on to, some anchor of stability, without it the day would slip into anarchy. And only after its completion was he was ready for anything, for any act of illogic and unreason" (EA 120).

Physical exercise provides him with a temporary but meaningful sense of self. It can be considered as his altruistic act for the day. On occasion, he attempts to address or bypass his feelings of isolation by expressing his dissatisfaction through the use of offensive language and references to bodily functions. The use of taboo words becomes a potent tool in his possession. It might be inferred that this is merely one of the methods through which Agastya demonstrates his authority or dominance over the incomprehensible world surrounding him. During the concluding stage of the novel, Agastya has the opportunity to visit Baba Ramanna's Rehabilitation Home for Lepers. This visit deeply affects Agastya in a way that surpasses any previous experience. "Initially, to him, Baba Ramanna had seemed pleasantly mad and completely remote, a do-gooder out of a book of legends for children, a small time Ishwar Chandra Vidhyasagar or a male Mother Teresa" (EA 235). However, at a later time, this man appeared to be more than human at brief and disturbing moments, as he witnessed the vastness of the accomplishments made from a state of barrenness. Agastya is experiencing genuine emotions for the first time due to a human endeavor.

Conclusion:

He is not only wonderstruck by the immensity of ambition but also by “its nobility and virtue... the limitlessness of the potential of human endeavour” (EA 235- 36). This is a pivotal moment for Agastya, leading him to recognize that human beings are not entirely devoid of value. Along with his pals, Agastya begins to challenge the foundations of Western metaphysics, the fundamental perspective that has shaped his identity. This perspective generates a feeling of being disconnected from everyday life, resulting in unfamiliarity. Regarding the impact of Western upbringing and education, it is a sense of dislocation prevails and it is acutely experienced because ‘the real’ is what is thought to be apprehended through English education, that belief itself being rudely contradicted in everyday interactions.

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