

Alienation and Existential Dilemma in Upmanyu Chatterjee's *English, August: An Indian Story*



Aditi Kalra

Assistant Professor
Department of English, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur (Rajasthan)

Abstract

Alienation and Existential dilemma has become an important part of modern human society. Man has been totally indulged in his materialistic pursuits but a sense of alienation and a search for one's identity and belongingness come naturally with this materialism and unprecedented technological advancement. Upmanyu Chatterjee has beautifully delineated the existential crisis, alienation and identity crisis of modern youth in his maiden novel. The novel follows the reflections and experiences of the protagonist, Agastya Sen. He is a trainee civil servant posted in a provincial town of Madna. The present study intends to explore the theme of alienation and existential dilemma in the novel. Through the characters of the protagonist and other westernised persons in the novel the author tries to depict the cultural issues of modern Indian society.

Keywords: Existential Dilemma, Alienation, Identity Crisis, Rootlessness

Introduction

English, August: An Indian Story is authored by Upmanyu Chatterjee. It was first published in 1988 and was later adapted into a film by the similar name in 1994. The novel portrays the struggle of a young civil servant who is posted in a rural area. This novel is considered to be a very authentic portrayal of the condition and state of mind of Indian youth in the 1980s. Upmanyu Chatterjee is one of the powerful and emerging voices amongst India's postcolonial authors of his time. His novels are written in a humorous style. Through his works, one can see his protests against the bright image of the Indian Administrative System. Most of his novels depict the life of a young Indian but westernized civil servant who is posted in a remote town. His novels contain sense of humour, powerful language and a keen eye for the portrayal of the life of middle-class India. The satirical aspect of his novels is also very prominent.

One of the most recurring themes of postcolonial novels is the existential crisis. The existential crisis or dilemma is that state of an individual where one questions the very foundations of one's life. It is a philosophy where one tries to find the meaning of one's life and oneself through individual responsibilities and free choices. In the Myth of Sisyphus Albert Camus asserts, "In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile... This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity". This dilemma is portrayed deftly in the novel. The novel is centred around the protagonist, Agastya Sen's, an IAS officer posted in the provincial town of Madna where he wastes one whole year of his training ridiculing everything around him, no appetite for learning and with no ambition and no clear goals. But inwardly he questions himself about the purpose of his

existence. The author tries to portray the present young generation “the generation that doesn’t oil its hair” which is struggling to find meaning in the absurd and meaningless world. Sumbul Nasim writes “Chatterjee strikes a comparison with the Post 1950s British absurdist dramatist, Harold Pinter...Just as Pinter is renowned for presenting the absurdity and ambiguity of life, the crisis of living, alienation and isolation of characters, a completely incomprehensible world, uncertainty of truth, unexplained incidents, and the significance of “room”, similarly Chatterjee, here, presents all these in a narrative marked with his relentless obsession with death and sexual and scatological references” (Nasim 454).

The novel follows the reflections and experiences of the protagonist, Agastya Sen. The trainee civil servant feels dislocated and aimless here. While neglecting his professional duties, he indolently consumes marijuana and indulges in sexual fantasies. He refuses to stick to any single idea and opinion. He struggles to find himself and his place in the world. Many factors come into play for this dilemma, such as, colonial syndrome, rootlessness, English education, uninterested in the job, dislocation, alienation, loneliness, absurdity of life, boredom, dissatisfaction, vagueness and so on.

The novel’s title and protagonist’s name hints at the protagonist’s ambiguous identity. He is named after a mythological sage, Agastya, a true Bengali name. But his metropolitan upbringing and education has completely westernized him. He cannot relate to his own mythical name like Gogol in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*. He is called as Ogu, August or just English. “You are an absurd combination.” Agastya’s uncle Pultukaku says, “a boarding-school-English-literature education and an obscure name from Hindu myth”. He is quite indifferent towards what he is called by others. His name itself shows the dichotomy in his character and his indifference towards it hints at his sense of rootlessness.

Agastya’s sense of alienation is interconnected with his quest for his own identity. He is unable to find a proper answer to the question as to who is he and where does he belong to actually. Culture

and tradition of any particular place impart an identity to a person. Being deeply rooted in one’s own culture gives one a definite sense of identity. The protagonist lacks this definite sense. Though he is an Indian by citizenship but he is alienated from his native tradition and culture. Even in his school days he was not satisfied with his own identity and wanted to be an Anglo-Indian. “...he wished he had been Anglo-Indian, that had Keith or Alan for a name, that he spoke English with their accent.” He was very impressed with their colour, language and way of life and his friends often used to make fun of him for this. Said in his seminal work *Culture and Imperialism* says:

No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are no more than starting- points which, if followed into actual experience for only a moment, are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of culture and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively white or black or Western or Oriental.

Moreover, he does not share a strong bond with his family, friends, language and myths of his own land. He lost his mother when he was a three-year-old baby and was brought up by aunts. He was educated at a boarding school and visited his busy father occasionally. Family bonds work like anchors in one’s life. Lack of family ties results in the instability and aimlessness in the personality of Agastya.

Agastya Sen has a privileged life as he is born to elite parents. He is born with a silver spoon and is used to the western way of life. Having studied in prestigious boarding school and university, and father being a Governor, he has never come across lack of any luxury. He is more comfortable in US than in Indian countryside. He is the epitome of the contemporary youth of cosmopolitanism. That’s why when he is posted in the far-flung district of Madna in central India which is known as the hottest place of the country, it comes as a cultural shock to him. The rural India is quite opposite to his urban background. Here he struggles hard to

come to terms with the country life. He boils his drinking water like a foreigner, he is afraid of frogs, lizards and mosquitoes. He struggles with the local language. The 24 years old urban young man finds himself dislocated here.

The protagonist's attitude towards religion also presents his alienation from his own traditional and cultural roots. He is a hybrid. His father is a Bengali Hindu and his mother a Catholic from Goa. He is raised in a family where his relatives follow Bengali Hindu tradition but he does not adopt this religious attitude. During a pleasure trip with his colleague in Madna he along with his friends compare a pooja performed in Lord Shiva's temple to pornography.

There was a tube-light in the inner sanctum directly above the black stone phallus of Shiv. There the wives came into their own. They took turns to gently smear the shivling with sandal-wood paste, sprinkle water and flowers over it, prostrate and pray before it, suffocate it with incense, kiss their fingers after touching it. Agastya found the scene extraordinarily kinky.

The uncertainty and confusion which has become a trait of Agastya's personality is reflected in his professional life also. Following the steps of his father, he enters into most coveted administrative services. But very soon he gets frustrated with his job also. "I don't look like a bureaucrat, what am I doing here. I should have been a photographer, or a maker of ad films, something like that, shallow and urban". Like Shakespeare's Hamlet Agastya also suffers from the hamartia of inaction. People have admiration and respect for his job profile. But he lacks the proper conviction. He observes the inefficiency, corruption and malpractices of Indian administration but he never tries to take any step for the reformation. People come to him with their problems with a hope for betterment but he just keeps on passing their files. He always tries to escape meetings and professional gathering and feigns illness. Despite being in the most prestigious job he toys with idea of changing the job but then again, he never actually works for it. His doubtful attitude towards his identity

and self-worth results in the wastage of his time, energy, intelligence and talent. His sense of alienation and identity crisis is aggravated by his lack of interest in his professional duties. Richard Cronin in *The Oxford Guide to Contemporary World literature* comments that Agastya's life is "a bitter parody of the dislocation between the urbanized Western consciousness that Chatterjee shares with his hero and the town to which Sen has been posted" (Cronin 209-110).

His posting place Madna, its location and surroundings further increase his inner anxiety and frustration. He is an urban bred man, spending almost all his life in Delhi and Calcutta, he finds himself dislocated in the hinterland of Madna. During his first trip to Madna he feels,

Outside the Indian hinterland rushed by. Hundreds of kilometres of a familiar yet unknown landscape, seen countless times through train windows, but never experienced –his life till then had been profoundly urban... To him, these places had been, at best, names out of newspapers, where floods and caste wars occurred, and entire Harijan families were murdered, where some prime minister took his helicopter just after a calamity, or just before the elections.

The horrible living conditions bothers him greatly there. It prompts him to smoke marijuana and being stoned all the time. As a result, Agastya is continuously in a state of daze and goes on with his daily routine robotically. He indulges in marijuana, masturbation and alcohol. The dull and laidback attitude of his senior officials makes his situation worse. It seems that work holds the secondary place here for everyone and officials try to do little or no work done. They just try to keep their social life lively by displaying their lavish and privileged life style. Agastya feels lethargy and heaviness around him but he does not possess the willpower to overcome it. His restlessness and the habit of smoking prevent it. Thus, he gets stuck in a vicious cycle. To console himself he considers his stay in Madna as a temporary arrangement. This tendency of thinking every situation transient and fleeting also reflects his sense of rootlessness and

alienation. He feels as an alien here surrounded by strangers. He grows close to only those people here who in some ways or other believe in his own philosophy, like Sathe, who is devoted to his cartoons and Shankar who loves *thumari*.

In the novel Agastya is not the only character who is suffering from identity crisis. His friends Dhrubo, Renu and Neera also have identity crisis. Dhrubo is working as an executive in a foreign bank but he is not satisfied with his high-paid job and wants to join IAS. Dhrubo's girlfriend Renu breaks up with him and goes abroad as she feels India is not for her. But later in her letters, she complains that she is feeling equally alien in foreign and wants to come back. Madan's sister also cannot identify herself with her surroundings. She is hell bent on going abroad for studies. She has adopted a fake accent and behaves like a foreigner. Similarly, Agastya's class mate and later colleague Bhatia is also fascinated with USA. Bhatia's "ambition had been to go abroad ('to the US of A'), perhaps to show it how well he fitted in with its lifestyle". All these characters share a sense of alienation and identity crisis. M. David Raju opines "All the city educated youth in the novel are somehow caught in the web of existential dilemma. They are in a fix, indecisive of a career, unable to love and progress in the career in spite of their intelligence and capabilities that reminds us 'To be or not to be' situation" (Raju 201).

The novel depicts the existential dilemma of an individual who lives in a society that is experiencing rapid changes due to the forces of globalization and cosmopolitanism. These forces create a deep chasm between modern and the native culture. At the same time the novel also portrays the impact of British colonial rule on the psyche of Indians and how this has led to the identity crisis. In this context Shashi Tharoor opines, "Colonialism misappropriated and reshaped the ways in which a subject people saw its history and even its cultural self-definition" (An Era of Darkness, 233). It is a well-known fact that the colonial powers used education as a tool to make the colonized submissive and useful for them. They indirectly tried to impose their cultural superiority over Indians

and tried to brainwash them into questioning the history and authenticity of their own culture, tradition and religion. Gauri Vishwanathan has rightly asserted, "The English education was introduced in India with an object to achieve and maintain political domination, through cultural hegemony, by discreetly introducing Western values and perceptions among the natives and moulding them as subjects" (Masks of Conquest...18).

The protagonist, Agastya, is a by-product of the colonial Macaulay education system and his alienation can be attributed to this fact also. He is an Indian by the skin colour but his education and upbringing has turned him into an English man. His fascination with the civil services also reflects this. Though his mind is always in the wanderings and he is weighting other career options too but civil services being his first career choice asserts this tendency. Western system of education encourages a person to strive for individual achievements and happiness and it ignore the concept of collective happiness. This is against Indian values. Following this Agastya is unable to have empathy towards the miseries of the common masses of Madna. Administrative service remains just a career option for him. He is not keen to actually serve the people who need him. He also fails to develop a close and healthy relationship with his colleagues, leading towards a sense of alienation. Moreover, the administrative services, the railways, the English language, western life style etc which have been Indianized thoroughly reflects the presence of the British empire in our country. The novel contains various descriptions of old and deteriorating building of collectorate. The symbolic power of this building showcases the still existing effect of colonial structures and mind sets. Colonial syndrome is seen in the novel where the protagonist and his friends are internally colonized by Westernization in their dressing, habits and they are not ready to accept the conventional Indian life and society. The impact of colonialism is so strong on these young men that the protagonist wants to be called as August instead of Agastya, and his friend Mahendra Bhatia wants to be called Mandy. Further Mandy wants to wear only Jeans

and even loves to get AIDS as it is raging in America. This internal colonization makes the protagonist feel alienated from the society around him and questions himself the purpose of his living.

An IAS officer whose duty is to look after the well-being of others, Agastya gets so much involved in his personal dilemmas that he doesn't get time or interest to think of those whom he is supposed to serve, care and administer. He finds his job so routine, boring and considers other career options like photography, working for publishing house, yet continues to be a civil servant. This shows his dilemma in his career. He is so uninterested in his job that he even prefers to act in a porn film rather than to be a bureaucrat. His apprenticeship is a mere waste because he takes delight more in the Bhagvadgita and Marcus Aurelius's meditations than the District Gazetteer, City Survey Manual and Manual of Rules and Standing Orders related to Land Records Establishment. During his official meetings with Collector, he spends an hour writing letters to his father, uncle, Dhruvo and Neera about his sense of dislocation. He says: "I'm 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". The main cause of his alienation lies within, in his outlook. Agastya's alienation makes him suffer from strange loneliness. He wishes to be alone. He doesn't want to share his room with anyone. For this reason, he does not even want to marry as then he will have to share a room with a strange girl.

Agastya and his friends represent the highly intellectual people of the present postmodern generation who are from wealthy background with good education. This lot is highly uninterested in the routine things as they feel lost, unhappy, finds life meaningless until and unless they are given some challenging tasks. They try to find and crave for something more undefined and intangible which they assume would give some purpose to their lives. This generation's outlook is that "The world isn't a wonderful place full of exciting opportunities. It's generally dull and fucked everywhere". So, they don't find anything exciting in this world that can accelerate their life.

The existential crisis makes Agastya Sen behave like an alien and transforms him into an astute liar. He lies about his personal details like marriage and his parents. He says that he is twenty-eight years old while he is only twenty-four. She lies that he is married twice and his wife has been to England for a cancer operation. He tells a hooligan that he has climbed Everest. He only confides in his uncle and tells him, "I'm not very happy in Madna. I can't settle down to the job...I don't want challenges or responsibility or anything, all I want is to be happy."

Conclusion

Upmanyu Chatterjee has beautifully delineated the existential crisis, alienation and identity crisis of modern youth in his maiden novel. His own experience as a civil servant gives the work a realistic touch. The novel ends with a question regarding the transformation of the protagonist's personality after his experience in Madna. Though it might not change him completely but it gives him an opportunity to come across an entirely different world from his own and have a glimpse of the miserable life of rural as well as tribal people of India. At last Agastya decides to take one year leave and hopes to have a more meaningful existence.

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