

“EXPLORATION OF INDIVIDUAL CONFLICTS IN THE NOVELS OF UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE”

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Abstract

Upamanyu Chatterjee is an Indian Civil Servant and Writer. This paper makes an attempt at Exploration of Individual Conflicts in the Novels of Upamanyu Chatterjee. ‘English, August: An Indian Story’ is a sequel to ‘The Mammaries of the Welfare State’ and ‘The Last Burden’. Conflict is the result of competing desires or the presence of obstacles that need to be overcome. There are three main types of conflict identified in literature: man versus man, man versus nature and man versus self. Agastya looks for individual’s search for the meaning of his life. He suffers from cultural alienation, social alienation and self alienation. He suffers not only from outer but also from the inner problems caused by his dislocation and displacement in rural town, Madna. The Last Burden evinces the inner friction of a middle class family where every individual seems to be thinking about his or her own self. The bond of love appears to be totally lost. Agastya Sen is a passively victim hero, trapped in a ridiculous situation and unable to extricate himself from there. He faces bribery and other corruptions of the bureaucratic world in a way typical of a man who has been rendered impotent to react normally. The main characters of his novels are suffering in their personal life.

Keywords: Agastya, Jamun, Conflict, Madna, Chatterjee, Alienation

Upamanyu Chatterjee is an Indian Civil Servant and Writer. He joined the Indian Administrative Service in 1983. The major characteristics in his novels are alienation and conflict. His personal life seems full of dichotomies. Many characters of his novels are written primarily in a satirical way. Chatterjee wrote these novels based on the Indian Administrative system and Indian middle class family. He depicted with hilarious sarcasm. This humorous writing placed the reader in a state of shock as the writer went to an extent which his Indian contemporaries did not dare to go to. Though his works, he dared to match the sensibility which one uncovers only in modern European novels.

Conflict in narrative comes in many forms. In works of narrative, conflict is the challenge that main characters need to achieve their goals. Traditionally, conflict is a major literary element that creates challenges in a story by adding uncertainty in the path of reaching goals. A narrative is not limited to a single conflict. While conflicts may not always resolve in narrative, the resolution of a conflict creates closer or fulfilment, which may or may not occur at the end of the story.

In literature, conflict is the result of competing desires or the presence of obstacles that need to be overcome. Conflict is necessary to propel a narrative forward, the absence of conflict amounts to be absence of story. There are three main types of conflict identified in literature: man versus man, man versus nature and man versus self.

As stated above in the definition of conflict, all literature requires conflict to have a storyline. Most stories show a character arc from the beginning to the end, displaying development or transformation of the main character's nature or opinions. The majority of this development and transformation occurs due to conflict. Conflict challenges a character's convictions and brings out their strengths and weaknesses, much as it does in real life. Conflict is not necessarily "bad" and often it is not obvious which side is right or wrong just that it presents difficulties to the protagonist. Most stories contain more than conflict throughout the course of the plot, though often there is one overriding conflict that lasts the duration of the story.

Chatterjee's first novel *English, August: An Indian Story* set the tone for what would become a recurrent theme in his work, the individual's search for the meaning of life and his particular role in the world. The protagonist Agastya has just been recruited into the IAS and is headed toward "a year's training in district administration to a small district town called Madna". It is clear from the beginning of the novel that Agastya is urban and he is not suitable for the small town environment of Madna and the mentality that its inhabitants possess. He does not relish his new posting and in conversation with his friend Dhruvo, who has returned from Yale and has also been recruited into the IAS.

Once in Madna, Agastya finds himself lonely, bored, sex – starved, and disgusted with his colleagues in the service and with what seems to be the pointlessness of his own life. He passes his days in a blur of Marijuana – induced moments, masturbating frequently in the privacy of his depressing room with its one bed, desk and almirah. Though the complicated stages of his training during which he meets a vast array of comical, pompous, pretentious colleagues and their similar spouses. Agastya's alienation seems to be related to his estrangement from the culture, society and his own self. He suffers from cultural alienation, social alienation and self alienation. He suffers not only from outer but also from the inner problems caused by his dislocation and displacement in rural town, Madna.

Agastya fails to relate himself to the society represented by Madna district. He does not know even the real Madna beyond its offices. He does not find any stimulus for tribal development as for him inaction is better than action. He does not think seriously of Indian Administrative Service. Agastya tries to find out cause of his problems but he finds none. Though he tries to conceal the sense of dislocation, resulting in complete loneliness and non-adjustment in his letter to his father but he continues to suffer in the Collectorate. He does not like it at all. His mind is always preoccupied deeply in urban life, though his work in Madna ideally requires him to be a devoted servant of the people. The novel ends with Agastya having survived one harrowing year of training in Madna, assisted only by his innate sense of good humour and looking forward to his reunion with his father – the only sane voice in a novel that is peopled with a cast of buffoons.

The Last Burden, Chatterjee moves away from humour – his forte – and delves, in a more profound sense, into the same theme: the essential meaning of life. Only this time, his protagonist, Jamun, single and also a civil servant, returns home to Calcutta on receiving the news of his mother Urmila's need for a pacemaker to combat a persistent battle with heart disease. The plot provides the narrator the opportunity to examine the complex relationships that exist in the tiny joint family that encompasses his long – suffering mother, his cantankerous father Shyamanand; his smart-aleck, corporate executive brother Burfi; Burfi's Christian wife Joyce; and their two young sons, Doom and Pista.

One finds only spurious and destructive relationship between father and mother, between the mother and the two sons, between the father and the sons, and the elder son's wife and finally between the elder son and his wife. The only saving grace of the book is a sparkle of maturity that dawn on Jamun towards the end of the novel.

Shyamanand and wife have no sexual relation and they sleep in different rooms. Jamun observes the weird closeness between his mother and father. Unlike any usual normal couple they have never celebrated their birthdays or marriage anniversary. Hence Jamun does not know even the dates. But they are never comfortable with each other and bickering and wriggling is the most common phenomenon of the house. Shyamanand searches points on which he can quarrel with his wife and this turns the atmosphere of the house into a hell where no normal homosapien would like to live even for a single minute. Shyamanand's behaviour proves that he is also a man of flesh and blood and has certain physical needs to be fulfilled. They have not gone to bed in the same room since Jamun was conceived.

Jamun rushes home to look after his mother, he could never find any compatibility with his father and brother; he is emotionally attached with his mother, whose suffering has no measure. She had to combat her hypertension, her piles, corns, arthritis, heart, marriage

her mind. Her only solace is Jamun, she unfolds her “emotional self, her “alienated self” and her “isolated self” to him.

The novel evinces the inner friction of a middle-class family where every individual seems to be thinking about his or her own self. The bond of love appears to be totally lost. The relationship between Shyamanand and Urmila displays the lack of true love for and understanding of each other. Urmila has a feeling that her husband is resentful of her and doesn't like her being in a cosy state and she made complaints to her son Jamun.

Shyamanand is self-centered, inhuman and disgusting. Urmila is self-pitying. They both are intolerant of each other but dependent on each other. Chatterjee does not deal with victimization following violent crimes, in his novel. The Last Burden presents a case of domestic victimization in and through the character of Urmila. Urmila is a victim not of physical assault or damage but of male domination.

The Mammaries of the Welfare State, though a sequel to English, August: An Indian Story. Chatterjee brings back his long-lost creation Agastya Sen. Though Sen is not the central character of the novel, but is woven recurrently into its plot, the general backdrop is similar to the one to which readers were introduced in English, August. But there is no plot, indeed no point, other than to denounce, in the most vociferous invective, the corruption of the Indian Civil Service, satirized as the “Steel Frame”, and its running of the welfare state. Agastya is still lonely, confused, single and sex-starved, but he has found a partner with as voracious a sexual appetite as himself in Days, an advertising executive, whom he meets on a bus journey back to Bombay from Madna. She is the least despicable of the characters one encounters in this novel.

Agastya Sen is a passively a victim hero, trapped in a ridiculous situation and unable to extricate himself from there. He is surrounded by cranks, conmen and wheeler-dealers, but he does not think of fighting for courage, selfhood and a sense of moral human dignity. He faces bribery and other corruptions of the bureaucratic world in a way typical of a man who has been rendered impotent to react normally.

Agastya tries to solve his problem through proper channel. He goes to meet the Housing Secretary to discuss his housing problem, he refused to meet him just because of his grand seniority ego. He has to share his room with six strangers who even share his bed in his absence. He receives an eviction notice to vacate that room too. Upamanyu Chatterjee portrayed the individual conflicts so vividly through his novels.

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