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EXISTENTIAL DILEMMA: A STUDY OF UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE'S *ENGLISH, AUGUST: AN INDIAN STORY*

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ABSTRACT

Existentialism is initially proposed by Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher who described it as an attempt by an individual to know himself and the meaning and purpose of his own life's existence. Later this theory was exploited well in the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir. In Indian English Fiction this theme is seen in the works of Arun Joshi, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Jhumpa Lahiri. The existential crisis or dilemma is that state of an individual where one questions the very foundations of one's life as is portrayed deftly in the *English, August: An Indian Story* (1988) by Upamanyu Chatterjee. The novel is about the protagonist, Agastya Sen's stint as an IAS officer in the provincial town of Madna where he wastes the whole year ridiculing everyone, learning nothing and getting nowhere. But inwardly he introspects himself the purpose of his existence which leads to his self realization. Colonial syndrome, English education, dislocation, alienation, boredom of the protagonist leads to his dilemma in life. The author tries to portray the present young generation "the generation that doesn't oil its hair"(48) trying to find meaning in the mad, absurd, meaningless world. This study intends to explore the theme of existential dilemma in *English, August: An Indian Story* where the author tries to come up with a protagonist anguishing with dilemma realizes cause of dilemma and finally finds a way to come out of it.

Keywords: Existentialism, dilemma, dislocation, alienation, absurdity, self-realization

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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. -Albert Camus

Existentialism is a philosophy where one tries to find oneself and meaning of one's life through free will, choice and personal responsibility. The word "existentialism" seems to be coined by the French

philosopher Gabriel Marcel in the 1940s. It was actually originated with the 19th Century philosophers Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche in the 1940s and 1950s, but it is Jean-Paul Sartre who for the first time adopted this term and discussed it in his existentialist position in a lecture to the Club Maintenant in Paris on October 29, 1945. French existentialists such as Sartre, Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir wrote scholarly works on existential themes, such as boredom,

alienation, absurdity and nothingness. The present topic **existential crisis or dilemma** is that state of an individual where s/he questions the very foundations of life; whether his/her life has any meaning, purpose, or value. In simple terms it is nothingness or emptiness in one's life.

This dilemma is traced in the contemporary Indian English fiction, especially in the postmodern Indian English novels. One such novel is *English, August: An Indian Story*(1988) by Upamanyu Chatterjee who presents a very bleak and cynical outlook of life. The novel is about the protagonist Agastya Sen's experiences and reflections as a trainee Civil Servant at Madna, the scorching town in India, where he feels dislocated, lives without any ambition or conviction, consuming marijuana, alcohol and conjuring sexual fantasies. Mini Kapoor comments that the novel is "a J.D.Salingeresque take on an urbanite young civil servant's acclimatization year in hot, dusty and depressing Madna"(Kapoor 30). The narration is fragmented as it goes from present to past and vice versa. In the background of Indian bureaucracy in the postmodern world, Chatterjee portrays a new generation of Indians strongly influenced by Western culture experiencing existential dilemma.

The reasons for this dilemma are colonial syndrome, rootlessness, English education, uninterested in the job, dislocation, alienation, loneliness, absurdity of life, boredom, dissatisfaction, vagueness and so on. Sumbul Nasim comments that "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).

Colonial syndrome is seen in the novel where the protagonist and his friends are internally colonized by Westernization in their dressing, habits and not ready to accept the conventional Indian life and society which is seemed to be meaningless to

them. 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. Sanjay Kumar rightly comments in his article that "The protagonist of *English, August* suffers from an inexorable sense of exile and this feeling of exile is produced in him by an acute awareness of his colonial legacy, the two mutually opposed traditions he has been a heir to"(Kumar 102). It also leads to rootlessness. Bill Ashcroft observed that the crisis of identity is caused by "cultural denigration, the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model" (Ashcroft 9). As a result of this colonization the protagonist lacks the sense of belongingness and is confused over his identity. Dhira Bhowmick opines in his article that "through his experience and understanding of himself [...] continued influence of colonialism in creating a new class of Indians, those who are confused about their own identity and value system"(Bhowmick 71).

English education to certain extent is a reason for this colonial mindset as the characters get exposed to westernization and are attracted towards it. Nissim Ezekiel in his review of *English, August: An Indian Story* says, "It is Agastya's Darjeeling school that established his alienation, of which he remains conscious virtually throughout this Indian story" (August 21,1988). English education made them so modernized that the characters of the novel started feeling dislocated in their own country and not able to cope with the conventional Indian life. Gauri Viswanathan says that "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"(Viswanathan 40).

By profession an IAS officer, Agastya gets so involved in his personal dilemmas that he doesn't get time or interest to think of those whom he is

supposed to serve, administer and lead. 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 Bhagavadgita and Marcus Aurelius's meditations than the District Gazetteer, City Survey Manual and Manual of Rules and Standing Orders related to Land Records Establishment. While the official meeting was going on with the 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" (*English, August* 131).

The very first glance of Madna with paandhabas, disreputable food stalls, lit by fierce kerosene lamps, cattle and clanging rickshaws on the road puts off Agastya and he could not relate himself with the town. He finds no coherence between his past and present life or even between the three spheres- the official, the unofficial and the private- of his Madna life. Upamanyu Chatterjee depicts Agastya's character in his most imbalanced moments as the one who lives in a claustrophobic room, being ravaged by mosquitoes, with no electricity, with no sleep, in a place he disliked. Richard Cronin in *The Oxford Guide to Contemporary World literature* rightly says that Agastya's life in Madna 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).

As a result of dislocation, Agastya was unable to adjust to rural life in Madna and to its people whose frequencies didn't match with him. ARN Hanuman rightly says that "through his anti-heroic protagonist, Chatterjee gives the message that today's English educated Indian urban youth, steeped in careerism, is a victim of the breakdown of meaningful communication and relationship with his society" (Hanuman 87). Agastya feels alienated

from his own self, finds himself as an odd object in Madna's society and culture. The main cause of his alienation lies within, in his outlook. The freelance writer and critic, Geeta Doctor in her review of the novel says that Chatterjee succeeds "in making both August's alienation real and the atmosphere of Madna oppressive, without being alienating or oppressive himself" (Doctor Geeta 19).

Agastya's alienation makes him suffer from strange loneliness, whereas what he had wished was to be alone as he doesn't want to share his room with anyone, not even wanted to marry as he has to share a room with a strange girl. The best example of his avoiding of outside world and being lonely is well portrayed when the author describes one such situation.

Then he went to the bathroom and out through the outer door, turned the corner, slipped past his windows, and came to the front. No one around. He locked his front door from the outside and returned to his room from the bathroom. He closed and bolted the opaque windows (272).

Agastya feels that he is in a baffling world where absurdities galore and is assailed by a sense of unreal and weirdness. Shankar, another civil servant living in Madna finds absurdity of existence as a ubiquitous quality. "After all, everything around us is.... 'inexplicable, fundamentally inexplicable" (99). The reader finds this absurdity not around Agastya but incidentally in himself. On one hand Agastya is concerned about his health and he ties a handkerchief over his head and jogs every day to keep him fit but cannot do away with marijuana consumption, though he is well aware of the consequences. Agastya tries to do away with his ennui-stricken life by giving a demonstration on how to boil water to his cook and conjuring weird things like people being reported to die of boredom in their postmortem reports.

Agastya suffers from acute existential dilemma and doesn't find any purpose of his life. He envies the concreteness of the worries of the common office-goer and feels guilty about not living the ordinary life. He confesses to Neera, one of his friends, that he envied Baba Ramanna and the Naxalites of Jompanna, not for their nobility of

purpose, but for their certitude in knowing what to do with themselves. P.V.Jayaraj rightly says that “the fleeting nature of happiness pitted against an overwhelming sense of meaninglessness in the dull scheme of life is felt intensely by all the heroes of Chatterjee” (Jayaraj 4).

Throughout the novel the protagonist feels desolated and feels his life “emptier than usual”(134). Marcus Aurelius, the Roman philosopher makes him feel better, because Marcus seemed to have more problems not the soul-squashing problems of being poor, but the exhilarating abstract problems of one immersed wholly in one self. But ultimately neither Marcus nor the Gita matters to answer Agastya’s overwhelming questions. “Yet he had loved those lines once..... Now he felt that those were far too many words to use to express any genuine longing for emptiness”(135). He is so confused with his self that even when he goes for holidays to Delhi, his conversation with his friends is mechanical. Sitting together, they are like “two islands”(163). He lacks attention and slips into his own day dreams, makes distorted versions of the conversation. Once he goes to Collector’s bungalow and Shipra, the six year old daughter of the Collector shouts out that ‘Bungali uncle has come’ and other kids repeat the same. But Agastya hears that they are shouting “Pumbaali Kunkal has bum”(181). At Madna, Agastya feels alive only in his room and leads a secret life. This reminds the reader of Rose from *The Room* and her relation with her room.

The room becomes an image of the small area of light and warmth that our consciousness, the fact that we exist, opens up in the vast ocean of nothingness from which we gradually emerge after birth and into which we sink again when we die. The room, this small speck of warmth and light in the darkness, is a precarious foothold . . . (Esslin 235-36).

Existential dilemma made the protagonist to develop a sense of ironic vision at every one and at every situation which is a way out for his restlessness. Out of boredom he wants to generate fun in his life by indulging in mean thoughts, desires, and actions, and starts taking pleasure in other

people’s pain, stealing keys, telling lies frequently and so on. Once he stole the car keys of the Collector in the bungalow and funnily visualizes how the Collector would react and shout at the driver. Finally he laughed at the meanness of his action. A.K Singh says that “it is more out of his bewilderment and confusion that Agastya acts in the manner most unsuitable to him. The real cause as to [...] new generation with absolutely different goals and ideals for itself”(Singh 92). As his Existential dilemma increases day by day, he considers the soft option of resignation from the IAS, and escape into a secret world of drugs, liquor, sex and music that enhance the level of his fantasies. But Agastya’s father, a matured person advises, “But Ogu, remember that Madna is not an alien place. You must give it 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”(96).

Not only Agastya, other characters of the novel also experience existential dilemma characterized by confusion, cynicism, incoherence, listlessness. They believe that it is absurd and futile to work or live. Agastya’s friend, Dhruvo, a Ph.D. from Yale, lives an unreal life working with the Citibank in Delhi and prepares for the Civil Service examination. Madan, Dubey, Mohan and Bhatia also feel the same. Madan is disgusted to be clean and says “because of this damn job, I have to look clean every day... It’s sick, I think, having a job, having to work. Your whole day is gone [...] Every day in the office I feel as though my head is being raped [...] Do you two ever feel like that?” (171-172). This reminds us of the recent controversy involving the famous Bollywood actor Salman Khan whose comments about how he felt working for the movie “Sultan” for which he was demanded a public apology by the Indian National Commission for Women (NCW) and the Shiv Sena, whereas the author has sounded the same way back in 1980s itself.

Upamanyu Chatterjee posits the Existential dilemma as a universal feature thus giving the novel a postmodern sense, since this dilemma is experienced not only by Agastya who is posted at rural Madna but also by Renu, Dhruvo’s friend, who is in Illinois. The readers understand that the dilemma is a mere state of individual mind, but not a

territorial problem. M. K. Naik and Shyamala A. Narayan observes that “the protagonist’s existential angst is not after all a routine gesture of conformity to modern cynicism, rather than an adequately motivated state of mind” (Naik and Narayan 59). Agastya’s father who dubs his son’s generation as “the generation that doesn’t oil its hair”(48) criticizes that they fail in understanding the deeper meaning and purpose of human life and end up assuming it as absurd, strange, meaningless, and incomprehensible.

Agastya represents the highly intellectual people of the present postmodern generation who are from wealthy background with good education and are uninterested in the routine things, feel lost, unhappy, finds life meaningless until and unless they are given some challenging tasks. They 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”(78). So they don’t find anything exciting in this world that gives kick to their life. It reminds us of the hero of the Tollywood movie ‘Kick’ where the hero doesn’t find kick in his life until he is given something challenging. M. David Raju aptly says that “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). This spirit touches its acme in the letter of Neera expressing her feelings at the loss of her virginity, which expresses her angst and revenge of the natural and biological forces against customs, creeds, conventions and taboos so unnaturally imposed against them. A.K.Singh comments that Agastya’s angst is “his generation’s angst against social, political and moral institutions with irreverence”(Singh 169).

Despite all the perplexities of his life, Agastya evolves as a better and more sensible human being towards the climax of the novel when the readers find that his visit to Chipanthi ignites the change. Murari Prasad aptly points: “Agastya appears to be close to changing his mindset after a

visit to Chipanti.....moved by the plight of the hapless women..... for a while he is recklessly honest”(Prasad 43). The plight of the villagers to fetch a pot full of drinking water moves him to the core. The lack of basic amenities and bare and naked truth of poverty moves him to do anything within his power to improve the situation. However, this small respite though relieves him from his boredom temporarily, it could not effect a permanent change. In response to W.B.Prathima’s query if Agastya’s involvement with the life –affirming medium of water is the turning point in his life, Chatterjee responds that “the whole water issue is his first outward movement. But not in a dramatic way; it is just the hint of looking outward. Even though he is longing to be self-absorbed, events in themselves can pull a person out” (Chatterjee, 56).

As the novel progresses, Agastya seem to be unable to stick to his job and do service and was always invaded by his happy images of his past. He becomes restless, guilty and baffled. His friend Sathé’s advice leads to a quest for existence in a universe *sans* meaning where the protagonist decides to ponder over the intricacies of existence by taking a year off. He writes to Dhruvo, “I’ve become your American, taking a year off after college to discover himself”(288) . Elaine Williams writes in the *Times Literary Supplement* that Agastya suffers from an existential crisis which can be solved by putting faith in the Hindu belief in the virtue of self-knowledge and renunciation and by adopting a meditative and rhythmic life. At the end when he was posted to Koltanga, another small town as Assistant Collector, he boards the train and reads Marcus Aurelius, where he realizes that his dilemma lies within, in his perception and not without and attempts to resolve his dilemma. “Today I have got myself out of all my perplexities; or rather , I have got perplexities out of myself- for they were not without, but within; they lay in my own outlook”(288).

In fine, Upamanyu Chatterjee is successful in the perfect portrayal of a typical Indian youth who is generally infected with the dilemmas in life despite the right education, occupation and privileges. He deftly brings to forefront the drab quality of the Indian Civil Service working conditions

which put many a brilliant Indian youth into a fix where they are lost and find their jobs so meaningless. Rukun Advani, his fellow alumni at St. Stephen's observes that Chatterjee is successful in shaping the protagonist as one of them. "He 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"(Advani 12).

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