

UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE: Phase 4- A STUDY OF HIS IMAGE AND SYMBOLS

Mohamad Akram,
Language Instructor
c/o- English Language Centre,
Jazan University, KSA

In this study, Chatterjee has quite sarcastically exposed the condition as well as the predicament of the Welfare State. Each word is a symbol in its own way. The last chapter 'WAKE-UP CALL' is also tinged with Chatterjee's piquant yet witty symbols. The very title of the chapter indicates a new beginning amidst the all ends like Eliot 'in my beginning is my end'. The very last page is very much soothing as well as abstract in the sense that though it is ended with 'tetra pack' yet Chatterjee's groan is inexplicable here:—

"Agastya, who was at that time inside the cabin, was not however at fault. He had just that moment managed to prise open the stiff fingers of Suroor's left hand and place in his swollen, livid palm a Yin Yang box full of dope. He then remoulded the fingers tight over the box. 'You look as though you need it, friend.'

*Miss Natesan turned the knob and opened the door a fraction when they all distinctly heard from somewhere inside Rajani Suroor a groan. It was a slow, loud and deep rumble of disgust, exactly the sound that one hears from someone who is wrenched out of sleep by the heat. To Agastya, it sounded dreadfully like a long- drawn-out Pa-yn-cho-om. They were a set of syllables appropriate for the occasion, he felt, a couple to bid adieu to the dead and with the balance, to greet the world of the living."*²⁶

Chatterjee realized the Welfare State that was truly everywhere and it is not clumsy at all. The height of sarcasm in the form of dispersed images is evident also in the chapter 'FIREFIGHTING ON A WAR FOOTING' where the very first paragraph along with the second one shows awesome commitment of Agastya:—

"To lesson the awesome amount of paperwork in the Welfare State, as a last resort, one government servant does sometimes, request another to arrange a fire in one of the rooms of an office (not in his own, naturally, for that would be conduct unbecoming of him). A great many files are disposed of in this way. Numerous instances of this style of decision-making spring to mind—the Aflatoon Tower blaze of 1973, the Non-Aligned National Centre conflagration of 1977, the Senapati Place catastrophe of the same year, the Millennium Plaza disaster of 1983 and, of course, the Vesuvian eruption at the TFIN Complex that the Welfare State took twenty-one months to recover from.

The burning down of the last was special mainly in the magnitude of the calamity. For the rest, like its predecessors, it provided, while it lasted, terrific entertainment to hundreds of spectators and after it had charred itself out, goaded the government to review for the tenth time the existent firefighting measures in its buildings.”²⁵

Upamanyu's Realistic Approach:

Indeed, the novel indicates ‘the world of the living’ in the midst of ‘waffle’ yet Agastya’s pent up feelings somehow find no cathartic outburst. Only the ‘life’s little ironies’ remain with him.

The last but not the least, novel of Upamanyu Chatterjee ‘Weight Loss’ is also symbolical in its own way. Between the ages of eighteen and thirty-seven, when he died, Bhola had just eight sexual partners, four women and four males. When he reviewed his life, it pleased him that he had maintained a balance between genders in his choice of lovers. Of course, it was ridiculous that he should at the age of thirty-seven be faintly and light-headedly embarrassed about how few were the people he had slept with. Then he reminded himself that that was nothing new, that he had also felt ridiculous not to worry. Indeed, this novel is about losing-weight and though the hero dies tragically young, it is, fundamentally comic. Bhola is innocent and unremarkable, but he has had the crippling obsession with sex and running, fears taking on the burden of emotional commitment and goes through life falling in love with all kinds of inappropriate people. At school, he lusts indiscriminately after his teachers, of both sexes, and is attracted to eunuchs. While in college, far from home, he has vaguely demeaning affairs with his landlady and with a vegetable-vendor-cum-nurse and her husband. Later, he marries, a woman who sings with a voice of liquid gold, fathers a daughter and suspects he is close to balance and beauty. Then his past catches up with him. Really, Upamanyu Chatterjee’s genius for black humour and the absurd has never been more compelling than in this unforgettable portrait of a lost life.

Symbols:

As far as the symbols and images are concerned in this novel we find it galore from the very second page of the novel:–

“‘Ridiculous. Only when you die, my woman, will you cease to feel ridiculous’. With his thumb and fore finger, he began kneading the soft armflesh between Bhola’s left triceps and armpit. ‘You’ll find time enough later in life, my boy, to learn big words.’ The pain puckered up Bhola’s face and propelled him up to the tips of his toes. ‘No sir please please sorry sir’—Anthony abruptly released him. Bhola stumbled to his knees, his upper arm jerking convulsively. Above him, Anthony spread his legs, thrust out his crotch, snarled and called him womanish. ‘Womanish’ was his favourite adjective with the younger students of the school. With the seniors, he, while stooging their cigarettes, exchanged jokes about the females on the staff. Bhola’s classmates relaxed, happy that he had drawn away so much of the teacher’s attention and, looking at their watches, calculated how much time was left before the bell. Bhola remained on his knees till Anthony entangled his fingers in his hair. The boy then made to

get up and butted his head into Anthoy's crotch. 'I heard Cleopatra's balls go plinch,' he later told an envious Dosto.

The teacher toppled over with a gasp that the class rejoiced to hear. Bhola tripped against and sprawled over him, rubbed his nose in the crook of his throat, pushed his knee into Anthony's abdomen and scrambled up before he could gush out in his trousers. Anthony turned over on his left, both hands cupping his testicles, knees drawn up, eyes shut, face screwed up, teeth bared. Bhola knelt beside him, one hand tender on bicep, a second on hip. 'Please sir what's happened. Please sir sir are you all right?' He trembled with the moment of perfect pleasure."²⁷

A brief Note:

Indeed, the symbols are the decanted signifiers in the post-modern texts whether it is a novel or a poem or even a short-story. Here also Chatterjee's symbols function as the decentred signifiers and thereby bringing out multiple layers of meaning. The story of Bhola is not an easy story to sketch in the course of the novel but as the plot advances Chatterjee unfurls the story of Bhola in a unique way. The following passage brilliantly exposes Bhola to the core:—

"He lost weight for twenty-five years but was never content. When, at the age of twenty-two, he learnt that muscle weighs more than fat, he was torn for months between muscle gain and weight loss. No matter what he tried apart from jogging-swimming, situps, cycling, pushups, walking with weights, chinups—there always remained a tyre around his waist and pale blobs on his thorax. The girth of his chest never exceeded that of his hips. His torso remained a cylinder and never became a vee. When, at the age of nineteen, he first read Marlowe's Dr Faustus, he felt that he himself would quite willingly have sold his soul to the devil in return for some divine pectorals. All shapes more attractive than his own galled him. Even the ridiculous Dosto with his swimmer's body became an object of subtle envy. In the school changing rooms, as Dosto flexed himself before the mirrors and drew the attention of the world to the ripples beneath his skin, Bhola behind him noticed the hideous contrast with the dollops of fat on his own body and saw his reflection become a distorted, watchful and depressed double image."²⁸

The passage clearly states the condition of Bhola in a symbolic yet lucid narration. Here the images Chatterjee uses are graphic and very much sensitive as example, 'pale blobs on his thorax', 'sold his soul to the devil in return for some pectorals,' etc. These images altogether bring out the very time through which Bhola undergoes in his teens. The passage is also a contrast between Dosto and Bhola which constantly infuses inferiority complex in Bhola. Another searing passage from the novel will clarify Bhola's lust, the distorted lust for sex:—

"The Sadhu has been both sexy and scary; Bhola dreamed and daydreamed of him for months. His mouth widened to engulf and suck on Bhola's skull and at the end of the red cord jerked a fat, rigid snake, its sausage tongue twitching in and out like the head of a penis. The sadhu joined the circus that had been performing nonstop in Bhola's head for the

last several years. Its lead performers included Gopinath the cook, Anthony, Jeremiah a couple of others and sometimes even Dosto in his swimming costume. They all uniformly behaved for more outrageously than they would have in real life. Each of them had his or her characteristic, typical setting but the stage that Bhola most favoured, on to which all his fantasy lovers eventually drifted, was the rooftop terrace, where, in the company of Gopinath, he had spent some of the most contented evenings of his life.”²⁹

Literature Review:

The author finely develops the ‘contented evenings’ of Bhola’s life in the passage. The extreme lust of Bhola finds here a fine representation through Chatterjee’s decentred signifiers used as symbols in the novel.

Quest for Identity in Upmanyu Chatterjee’s ‘Weight Loss’:

Rightly asserted M.K. Naik in his article ‘Quest for Identity in Upmanyu Chatterjee’s ‘Weight Loss’ that, “Bhola himself is the symbol of dejection and degeneration, of shock and violence in the novel”.³⁰ Indeed, if we look at the character of Bhola, we find the heavy dose of insanity and discrepancy in his character. Chatterjee here becomes a novelist of midnight hours in portraying the habits and moorings of Bhola. Bhola is as much haunted by the nightmare of existence as the character of Jonathan Swift. The feelings that Chatterjee expressed in the novel are the feelings of dread and disgust, misery and pain, tedium and weariness. The feeling of essential loneliness which an artist of today often develops has also its origin in Upmanyu Chatterjee. He shows again in the novel the neurotic and eccentric personality of Bhola. Bhola could not adjust himself to social conditions, and the result was poverty, and misunderstanding, licentiousness and malady. The more oppressive his feeling of loneliness, the more was he inclined to be sinful. The sense of sin was an obsession with him. He could have echoed the sentiments voiced in some branches of Indian philosophy that an individual has a sinful soul and it is from sin that he derives his origin. Indeed, Chatterjee treads the primrose path of dalliance to portray the exact character of Bhola. However, the last paragraph of the novel further points the mindscape of Bhola and his revised vision:–

“Before the blurred orange-dark veils of his eyelids, a child’s face, moon-like, grinned ecstatically at him. It was his daughter, he was sure of it, from the world to come, reassuring him that all was well. He had the impression that she wanted to pummel him for several minutes into waking up from the life that he was in. Never in all his years or in his dreams had he seen anything more welcome, more beautiful. At the sight of her, some metal in his forehead seemed to descend into his body and dissolve into the calm at its center. Everything became smiling. Her face crumpled up instead. Do people really weep for God as they do for their wife and children? Now who had asked that? Sri Ramakrishna? And why on earth should they? retorted Bhola, gently mussing his daughter’s hair, careful not to bloody it as the life dribbled out of him.”³¹

This last passage is symbolical and philosophical as well because here at least, we find a hope of redemption, a possibility of rejuvenation in the midst of ebony black ambience of the novel. Each and every word in the last paragraph is significant for it portrays the synopsis of

the entire novel and the revised thinking of Bhola in a brief way as well. Bhola thinks only of his daughter and broods over the world of positive fantasy and imagination. His moorings here find fine expression without any touch of melodramatic strain. He then thinks of God, the Almighty and remembers Ramakrishna. The image of Ramakrishna, at the very last line saves the novel from being totally dark and absurd. The only word supplies energy in the novel. Ramakrishna is the symbol of greater understanding and comprehensive sanity of the world. The image is apt and suits the occasion at the core.

Result:

However, to end the chapter few words more are essential. Chatterjee, in all the four novels tried to show the malaise and medley of the 'botched civilization' and the same symbols and images become the significant tool to him. His symbols are allusive, lucid, graphic and at times long-extended like the imagery of John Milton depicted in Paradise Lost. Chatterjee's words, phrases and expressions gush forth like a jet of water from a sprightly fountain, and in the rush of emotions and thoughts he sometimes loses track of syntax or proper sentence-structure, but his sincerity, to the 'self' is never shakable and his mastery of phrases in his novels is simply superb and enviable. Upmanyu Chatterjee is unquestionably wedded to art, and his commitment to prose art allows the reader to forgive him for his minor blemishes of rash pronouncement, harsh judgments of the manners of the characters and excessive physical or sexual exposure. In this golden realm of art, after all, nothing remains corruptible and contemptible, nothing sinful and lustful. This is well borne out by the mural paintings of Ajanta and Ellora and by the time-tested maxims of vatsayan. Indeed, Chatterjee excels all, especially in his portrayal of befitting images in his novels.

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