

**“STRANGE OBSESSIONS, EVASIVE FEAR, AND THE IDEA OF THE WELFARE  
STATE IN THE FICTION OF UPMANYU CHATTERJEE” –  
THE FINAL ESTIMATE**

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**Abstract**

Chatterjee’s ultimate point of view is to make the reader understand the significance of vibrating life and how people struggle even in convenient circumstances. All the protagonists of Chatterjee may be seen from the angle of socially misfit but the throbbing sensations and passions make them larger than life. If we take the instance of Agastya from ‘English, August,’ we find him in the world of carnivalesque, masquerade.

**Keywords:** The pattern is of human urges, existential fears and evasive silence.

*“Rich in stagnant expectations  
The common man rehearses nothing but frustrations  
Uttered in defeating silence of caves  
Deserted for long.”<sup>1</sup>*

These lines aptly sum up Upmanyu Chatterjee’s novels. Indeed, expectations are there but frustration and silence writ large in every pages of Chatterjee’s novels. The journey which begins with ‘English, August’, down to the ‘Weight Loss’ there is a completed pattern in the carpet. The pattern is of human urges, existential fears and evasive silence. Many conclusions emerge from what has been said in the foregoing discussions of Upmanyu Chatterjee’s novels. Images from nature and human life and its activity in the post modern life are recurring in his novels. In styles and imagery Chatterjee avoids all kinds of over - loading unless he is out for very special effects generally he finds away, middle way between intellectualism and lyricism, or Chatterjee balances the two in alternate novels. The variety and freshness of his style and realism add to literary and artistic qualities of his novels. Some efforts are required to comprehend them because they reveal the inner state of mind of the novelists which is full of thoughts and feelings. His images are clear - cut, concrete and precise; sometimes he has borrowed allusions and images from many sources but he has given his own original colour.

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Chatterjee may be seen from the angle of socially misfit but the throbbing sensations and passions make them larger than life. If we take the instance of Agastya from ‘English, August,’ we find him in the world of carnivalesque, masquerade. From the very beginning of the novel we find Agastya in dichotomy:–

*“He went up to the mirror on the dressing table, bent forward till his nose pressed against the mirror and asked himself silently what was happening to him. Not even twenty-four hours over and he felt unhinged, without the compensations of insight or wisdom. He lay down and looked at the wooden ceiling. He could masturbate, but without enjoyment. What is it? He asked himself again. Is it because it is a new place? Yes. So do I miss the urban life? Yes. Is it because it is a new job? Yes. The job is both bewildering and boring. Give it time, not even twenty-four hours. He waited for the mosquitoes. The ventilator was open, the room filled with the stench of the excrement of others when the wind came his way. My own shit doesn’t smell like that, he thought randomly. He absent-mindedly fondled his crotch and then whipped his hand away. No masturbation, he suddenly decided”.*<sup>2</sup>

These lines altogether are the testament of Agastya’s shattered belief and paralysed thinking. He is not at all satisfied in Madna he had to cope up with the situation there. This is the reason that he is over addicted to mar the boredom off:–

*“Agastya thought of getting some marijuana to ignite the whisky, as it were, but desisted. He felt unequal to the exertion, for one thing. Besides, he wasn’t sure how Shankar and his brother would view it. He remembered with a smile his uncle’s last words at Delhi railway station. ‘If you have to smoke that ganja, smoke in secret. It is not an addiction for display.’ He had then looked away. ‘Write as soon as you settle down’. His uncle had been so scathingly cynical when he had discovered Madan and Agastya smoking in their first college year. A winter Sunday, they had been on the roof, Madan filling a cigarette.”*<sup>3</sup>

Cigarettes and marijuana temporarily wave the solitariness off from the mind of Agastya but the reality the author tries to show, is the predicament of the post-modern man. The characters are amply serving the symptoms of the psychic malady which had taken hold of post-modern man. In that novel ‘English, August’ it is but natural that we meet with boredom, hopelessness and depression, mental disintegration, and nervous exhaustion and pathetic efforts to find the fragments of a shattered faith. The novel is peopled by characters who have lost the ability to live life fully. So also fear and sterile sex characterize the novel. Spiritual apathy together with split personality of Agastya has been explored in the novel. It is a realistic novel with the touch of Balzac’s naturalism and Laforgue’s symbolism. The graphic images and symbols as we stated early in the preceding chapters, are enough proof of what is yet to happen in the world of Agastya and in the novels of Upmanyu Chatterjee as well. In a sense, it is the wasteland for Agastya even for all the protagonists of all the novels. The circular journey amidst the bleak atmosphere, the madness, malaise and malady of the characters are so touching that we can hardly left any page unturned.

Similarly ‘The Last Burden’ focuses on the story of Jamun and the domestic family setting. The complexities of life as Jamun faces successively have been portrayed artistically as

well as realistically in the novel. Indeed, Jamun is compelled to live in the whirlwind of the family which makes the condition worse for him. He finds no solace in the family though all the members of the family are in mental stress. Once there he decides to stay on until one of his ailing parents dies. He barely admits to himself that there is, probably another stronger reason for his extended stay in the family home. Here also Kasturi is the critical character and Jamun finds relief in contact with Kasturi. Fleeting back and forth in time and space, and writing in a language of unsurpassed richness and power Upmanyu, Chatterjee presents a funny, bitterly accurate and vivid portrait of awesome burden of the family ties. It is extremely a well crafted tale of moribund familial ties, with an admirable ease and restraint. The author is a mercilessly gifted observer who points out every minute details and the curve of vicissitude in the family. In a sense, the novel is about breaking ties and renews open-ended relationships. The last page of the novel aptly describes everything in a nutshell:–

*“An amiable, almost horizontal drizzle while they wait on the platform. Hegiste shows up at eleven - thirty with a shaky wheel - chair of the gynae hospital. The train is fifteen minutes late. Shyamanand is in his creamish kurta-pyjama, crumpled and all-anyhow after the journey. Jamun is stunned at how much his father’s withered in three months; he is, or appears, a couple of inches shorter than he was. His once- silver hair is now acid-yellow, and he takes a second or two to recognize his son. The fancy flashes into Jamun’s mind that his father has been supplanted by a scifi clone from another globe, the inhabitants of which are slightly smaller versions of ourselves. ‘Hello, Baba, you look good.’ He touches Shyamanand’s feet and they enfold each other. ‘Hi, Agastya. Many thanks. How was the journey?’*

*Shyamanand doesn’t budge, but waits for the chair to be hauled and jolted into place under him; he feels so tuckered out that he can’t even rely on his right leg any more, and he mustn’t make an ass of himself in front of Jamun’s friends. Amidst considerable confusion-hissed directives and yanking of paralysed limbs- Hegiste and Vaman help Shyamanand into his seat.”<sup>4</sup>*

### **Chatterjee's Perception:**

Indeed, confusion is everywhere in the novel but Chatterjee portrays it very scrupulously. The third novel of Chatterjee ‘The Mammaries of the Welfare State’ also portrays the same existential fears, human urges and evasive silence through the portrayal of the grotesquery of governance. As we have stated earlier, the novel is a sequel to ‘English, August’, rather an extended version of the author’s views and visions as depicted in the first novel. This novel repeatedly portrays the difficulties and anxieties of a civil servant in administration. In this novel also Agastya’s views are expressed in a tangent manner:–

*“Agastya wished to contribute his views. ‘I too have examples of plain living and low thinking . The plain liver is my Assistant Director friend who turned vegetarian because he couldn’t afford meat. The low thinker is my cop acquaintance, a Station House Officer who was dementedly corrupt because he contended that he had four daughters to marry off with dowries of over five lakhs each. Speaking of which, why doesn’t the Welfare State legalize dowries for the civil servants of its Steel Frame? It could then stop paying them salaries altogether.’ ”<sup>5</sup>*

The dispersed meditation of Agastya finds its real exhibition in this narrative. Agastya is torn between his beliefs and disbeliefs, his vocations and avocations. Here Chatterjee's depiction of human nature is more severe and harsh because of the tempo which has to be maintained by the novelist. The doubts and conflicts continue in the novel and the quest toward the interior has been showed through multi-dimensional images and symbols. The novel also presents a disturbing scepticism about the governance in India and also an awareness that is illusory and cannot be sustained. Here the author's use of motifs is indeterminate and not schematic. The narrative method of Chatterjee includes all the variety ranging from omniscient narrator to the authorial voice which is one of the stylistic motifs of the novelist. It is a text of bliss according to Roland Barthes because it unsettles the readers' historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistencies of his taste, values and memories. Sometimes the novel seems fragmentary monologues of Agastya but all the monologues together with soliloquies merge in this novel and give it an organic shape. The data has been presented methodically and unscrupulously in the novel, as if the reader may take it as a report of the administration. Long passages are adjusted with italic lines and report presentation:–

*“Agastya made himself comfortable on some files on the window ledge. It was a good place to finish his joint; then he'd get back to locating Dhruvo. Sighing richly, he exhaled dragon-like through where the pane was meant to be. Before him, not a hundred feet away, were the rows of windows of some other wing of Aflatoon Bhavan. From his seat, he could see nothing else, no sky, no ground, just the occasional pipal sapling tenaciously finding life in the damp walls, the black waste pipes and the trash of fifty years thrown out of a thousand windows. Where they weren't slimy - green with damp, the walls of Aflatoon Bhavan were a dusty gray. One in two window-panes was broken, two in three windows wouldn't shut. Pigeons roosted on the occasional air-conditioner. Families of monkeys went about their business on diverse floors, under different ledges, much as though his seat was a vantage point from which to view a cross-section of some simian apartment block. He couldn't see much, though, of the interiors of any of the rooms that faced him. Those windows that hadn't been sealed off by air-conditioners had been stoppered by brown files, by mountain ranges of off-white paper, chunks of which, in landslides, had joined, on the overhangs below, the plastic bags, the newspaper wrappers of lunches, the dry ink stamp pads. Nothing, no record (the mountain ranges seemed to say) is ever thrown away.”<sup>6</sup>*

Indeed, the novel is a funny picture of the realistic situation and the waffle.

The last but not the least novel penned down by Chatterjee is 'Weight Loss' which is even more substantial and heart - rending. It is only tangentially about losing weight and though the hero dies tragically young yet the novel is significant in its own way. As is stated iteratively that the last novel of Chatterjee focuses on a particular topic that may be seen as a case of distortion because the character of Bhola in the novel is quite out of the way; he is the perverted personality in the fiction. The only thing that he does; does for himself, to satisfy his carnal desire whether it is homosexual or heterosexual or sexual. The novel has been casted in such a way that accurately and perfectly draws the attention of the readers. Chatterjee here tries to unfurl the curve of vicissitudes in the mind of Bhola and his moorings in the novel. As has been stated several times, the novel portrays also the post-modern sensibilities and the aftermath of the cyber age. Novels

galore in English written by the British or American authors portrayed or are portraying the 'botched civilization' but more accurate picture of perverted sex or squalor of the city life has been presented by Chatterjee in the Indian English novel. The absurdity and austerity together with abnormality looms large in this particular novel. Bhola may also be taken as a symbol of waywardness and totally disconnected personality, quite away from the general way of life as we generally perceive in our daily routine life. Rather we may also attribute the protagonist as a specimen of Chatterjee's dispersed meditation.

As it is the concluding chapter of the novel, so we must generalize the things a bit. We have already given proper attention in the successive five chapters about the main topic. Evasive silence and the reality have been expressed with great care in the first three chapters. It has also been tried to analyze the matter according to the chronological order of the novels. In each and every chapter, the discussions have been made on chronological order of the novels. A few words on the stylistic part may enrich the end. As far as the stylistic motif or style is concerned Upmanyu Chatterjee follows the dictum of the French critic Buffon's words (as we have stated earlier), 'l style est l home meme' ('style is the man himself'). In all the novels a general pattern in the carpet has evolved which we can perceive very much. Right from the use of omniscient narrator to first person narrative the author shows a variety of narrative skill in the novels. Likewise, authorial voice is subtly used in 'The Mammaries of the Welfare State' and 'English, August' that also acts as a choric role in the novels. The authorial voices at times, seem as a commentary on the situation, other times; it may be seen as a suggestion to the protagonist or the other Characters in the respective novels. Likewise, in the great Greek tragedies of Sophocles or Aeschylus or Euripides the author uses the authorial voices with a definite point of view and purpose but in a refined and sophisticated way. A lot of tones and overtones, eavesdrops are seen in the novels which are specially designed to embellish the novels. There also several images and symbols used in each and every novel are also significant to portray the evasive silence and the reality. First of all, the minute descriptions as depicting poetry on the walls in 'English, August' or showing all the nuances of administration in 'The Mammaries of the Welfare State'—all these things are carefully set down to portray the essential vision of the writer. Chatterjee has also presented graphic images, images that are curt and naturalistic to set the tempo and theme of the novels. The use of drafts and letters in the narrative scheme though diverts the attention of the readers, yet the writer has maintained the time-place-action unity to avoid inconveniences and disparities. All the novels of Chatterjee also represent the dichotomy and dilemma of the central protagonists of the novels. The conscious, sub-conscious and unconscious level of thinking and the way of thought processing of the heroes are well-presented in the novels. Rather we may say that the thought-structure of the characters is presented in such a way that, at times, may seem absurd or uneven but it is quite natural that to portray the discrepancies of the characters, Chatterjee is compelled to show the disparities along with abnormality through a tripartite structure. The 'English, August', as well as the 'Weight Loss' simultaneously portrays the sub-conscious mind of the characters and heroes as well. The sub-conscious thoughts of Agastya or Jamun or Bhola are the marks of their own distinguished way of living life. It has also been seen in the context of the themes that the thought process is not rational at several times but it is also normal because it shows, rather unfurls the total thinking level and the graph of comprehension of the characters.

**Result:**

To conclude the chapter, we may say that Upmanyu Chatterjee has presented the panoramic view of life in his four novels. The novels are tinged with human urges symbolized by Agastya, existential fears showed through Jamun and Bhola and evasive silence which is all pervasive in these novels. In brief Chatterjee waves the wand in his novels and the immortal characters of novels give us the sense of 'longing, lingering, look behind'. Indeed, open-endedness leaves the possibilities to unfurl more for the budding research scholars.

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