

UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE: Phase 3- A STUDY OF HIS IMAGE AND SYMBOLS

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Abstract

There is no doubt in the dictum what French critic Buffon asserted long ago '1 style est l home meme' ('style is the man himself '). Though the dictum became a cliché in the arena of twenty-first century English studies, yet the dictum has its resonance in Upmanyu Chatterjee. Generally the students of literature begin their respective English studies at the graduate and post-graduate levels with Francis Bacon who happens to be the most economical writer till now (in respect of word-placement and syntactical pattern) in English literature.

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The following passage emphatically shows the climactic ending of the novel:–

“Jamun is aware that Shyamanand’s letter doesn’t afford a complete picture of life at home. If he telephones Burfi in his office, for instance, he’s likely to be fusilladed with just how fiendishly difficult their father has been. Jamun is unhappy that Shyamanand is unhappy, but he’s also vexed by his own guilt, and by the selfish, emotional demands that his family members make on one another even in absence. He is sad, too, at the swiftness with which his mother’s augury—about Shyamanand’s misery after her passing—is being vindicated; at moments, he detests both his parents, one dead, one dying, for continually coercing him to choose between them; always, in their weaning of their sons away from each other, Shyamanand (as in the letter to Jamun) and Urmila have both, mindfully or semiconsciously, fibbed to them, or at least hidden from them bits of the truth.”¹⁴

Rightly asserted by Firdaus Kanga in 'The Tribune' that "Chatterjee is a mercilessly gifted observer. Basically the novel is about the family disturbance and insane modalities of a family. Though structured in a middle class family ambience, yet the character of Jamun becomes larger than life because of Chatterjee's glaring symbols and images."¹⁵ The last line of the novel is very much crucial to comprehend the succeeding novels of Chatterjee. Rather it is a mystic ending as we find with Eugene Marchbanks in the drama 'Candida'. Here also the writer successfully aims with the vivid symbols which are very much emphatic and forceful:–

*“Behind them is a gossamer rain. Well, not a bad beginning, reflects
Jamun.”¹⁶*

In the same way the third novel is a coarse satire to the grotesquery of the governance and the whimsical nature of the government servants. We find India in its microcosm in this particular novel. Some say that it is a sequel to the first novel of Chatterjee’s ‘English, August’. Indeed, the author defies convention in his writing and he has also defied “conventional wisdom and proved that great book can have great sequels.”¹⁷

The novel begins with a series of image and symbols starting from a very beginning in the very third page where Agastya’s settlement is hinted out in a simplistic yet in the cover of an image cluster:–

“She’d want her sunglasses and some tissues from her travelling bag and he’d got up to take it down from the overhead rack when he’d noticed an uneven dark blue strip running down the outside of the thigh of her whitish salwaar, like a ribbon down a bandmaster’s trouser leg. His new blue jeans had been shedding colour like a snake its skin. Destined To Fade, ran their ad; they were called Eff-Ups. He’d died of embarrassment for four seconds, then had plonked down with her bag on his lap, determined not to get up till journey’s end, or till she lay down on the floor of the bus, wriggled out of her kurta, peeled off her salwaar, sighed and begged him to gnaw off her panties with his teeth–whichever was earlier. Hadn’t she noticed how he’d touched her up? Ahh, her spectacles were off. Ohh, the blessings of imperfect sight.”¹⁸

This authorial comment is tinged with a simple simile which is significant enough to understand the mindscape of Daya and Agastya. Then again at the fourteenth page the gist of the novel is foretold in a brief and succinct paragraph:–

“I’ve been in Bhayankar now, me-laard, for twenty-two years, in which time the Welfare State’s done nothing for me for fee–which is as it should be. I’m not a freeloader, and I’m not complaining. I’ve paid in bribes for my ration card, my photo pass and my electricity metre. I’ve been bribed in return for my vote–but that’s all fine, it’s the proper procedure. Self-interest is the only commandment–naturally–of the Welfare State, the rest is waffle.”¹⁹

The last line of the paragraph emphatically tells the lacerating wounds of a common man in the post- independent ethos. Indeed, self-interest is the only commandment in the so-called Welfare State and the rest, indeed waffle. The other paragraph from the page twenty- sixth would automatically tell the story of the Welfare State:–

*“ ‘I did try once to milk a lakh or two of rupees out of the Welfare State:–’
Agastya here turned to an intelligently–smiling Suroor – it was out of that dairy farm the Department of Culture and Heritage. It had two mindblowing Twelfth plan Schemes of doling out lakhs of rupees to any bearded pseud documentary film-maker to shoot our Endangered Tribal Heritage and the Jewels of the North-East. A friend of mine and I’d mapped everything out–we’d lug a Handycam down to the dhabas by the river, behind the Tibetan Manastery on Mall Road in the University area, and film ourselves smoking dope with the pushers there. But at the last*

minute, our middle-class pusillanimity and squeamishness spiked our plans.

Many moons ago, when I was a babe in these woods, I'd imagined that People Like Us—i.e., those who've grown up on Richmal Crompton and the Rolling Stones, and who speak English more often than any other Indian language—we just aren't corrupt, we can't be, constitutionally. Fortunately, these silly notions evaporated pretty quickly in these woods—as soon as one grew up, really. How worthless one's upbringing's been when it's come to facing one's own country! Ah well.' ”²⁰

The chapter 'EFFICIENCY BAR' also portrays Chatterjee's visions and voices. Agastya's day to day life has been hinted out here also through the minute description and the linguistic efficacy for which Chatterjee is well known. The chapter started with the month October and Agastya's camp-office has been 'showed vividly':—

“The following October. Early in his career, while examining the junk in the official pen tray on one of the desks, Agastya had come across an ear-cleaning pen. Steely-grey in colour, it was made of some aluminium-like metal. Its nib, about an inch long and made from the same material as the body of the pen, was like the end of a ball-point refill, only more rounded, considerate, more moulded to the intricate inner spaces of the ear. When he'd realized what it was for, Agastya had been touched by the wisdom and the courtesy of the Welfare State. Instinctively, in each new office, he'd looked for it first thing on his desk and had never been disappointed. Tickling one's earwax with it was a wonderful way to unwind when the tensions of office become insupportable.

It was in his left ear and he in the midst of his pre-lunch office crash (than is to say, with eyes wide open, body behind his desk swaying in sleep, mind at home, files open before him, hand jotting and signing away) when the door opened to admit a man who looked as though he expected Agastya to spring out of his chair to receive him. He was tall, fiftyish, slim, with gold-rimmed spectacles, a trim jet-black wig, well-fitting dentures and bottle-green safari suit and no moustache.”²¹

This is a searing description of Agastya's life. The line 'Agastya had been touched by the wisdom and courtesy of the Welfare State' instinctively shows the thoughts galore that are coming up in the minds of Agastya. The idea of the Welfare State that Chatterjee infused in the entire novel symbolically has been revolving round every nook and corner of the plot. Even Agastya's interaction with Mr. Sen or Dr Harihara Kapila is imbued with the same spirit. Chatterjee's protagonists here are very much conscious about the mammaries as well as the Welfare State. Dozens of meetings Agastya attended but he never forgets the actual 'waffle' that lies behind all the things of life. Then again, the passage in which Agastya's oozings find an extra dimensional meaning, will clarify the point:—

“As usual, Agastya exaggerated without meaning to. To be sure, whenever he and Daya met, Casper still flew with the old vigour and froth, but because several hundred kilometres now separated them, they simply met less often. They wrote occasionally and frequently wished they hadn't. They were both by nature composed, self-centred and unhappy. They thought of each other only in fits and starts, often guiltily, puzzled at the

fickleness of their desire. They would have both liked to return to the old life—the romance by night, the yoghurt with honey at three in the morning, the happy film music through the open French windows—but they—Agastya in particular—were too dazed by the minutiae of their daily lives to act, to move towards recapturing their past. Their letters to each other reflected their sadness and confusion only indirectly, that is to say, they never straightforwardly described their feelings. Daya for example never wrote: ‘Look, cut the crap, let’s be together because then we both feel very nice, and despite—or perhaps because of—the differences in age, temperament and upbringing, we should give a future together a chance. Therefore, please ask the Welfare State for a transfer back to where you belong.’ Her letters instead were altogether of a different style.”²²

Rightly asserted Dr. Sharda Iyer that “Daya-Agastya episode is so intricate that Chatterjee gives it a bit in the midst of the complete waffle.”²³ Indeed, Chatterjee tries to give the relation a shape of sanity in the midst of insane atmosphere pervaded throughout the novel. The author is very much conscious that the description only of the Welfare State can mar the intrinsic quality of the novel and at the same time will make the texture of the novel borings, rather dry, dab and shabby. That is why, the episodic intervention of the love-story of Agastya is very much crucial in maintaining the tempo as well as the relief to the readers who will be heat or press if the dose of Welfare State is prolonged without suspension or family drama. Here also the Daya- Agastya episode is a long extended language of cart, ebony dark, arid love affair of the post-modern times. The episode is further symbolic in the sense that it brings out also the character of Agastya as well as of Daya. The discussion is very much comprehensive between Agastya and Daya and indicates much that we generally expect of:—

“Agastya shuddered at the prospect of their next assignation. Moreover, she was right; his last visit hadn’t been such a grand success. Of the three days that he’d been there, she’d had a female friend—a large, Caucasian Anand Margi whom Daya had addressed as Lazy Susie—staying over two nights and sharing her bed, hai Ram, so what was one to infer? Lazy Susie and Agastya hadn’t hit it off. She’d found August, his nickname, rather droll and him in general ill-informed when he, to make polite conversation, had asked her whether she, as an Anand Margi, liked dancing with the skulls of wolves. Later, Daya had told him that Lazy Susie had disclosed to her that the vibrations that she, Lazy Susie, had received from Agastya had been ‘cold, sneering and anti-life.’ One of the many things that he’d liked about Daya was that she came from another planet; there existed nothing to connect her with the world of the Pay Commission, the Steel Frame, Interim Relief, Off-White Paper and the efficiency Bar. With her, therefore, he’d felt less tired, less futile. On his last visit, however, he learnt that he should have known better; the Welfare State was truly everywhere and even those who sneered at its clumsiness condescended to suck at its dugs.”²⁴

Result:

The very text symbolizes Upmanyu’s bawdy, the very sexuality that is involved with post-modern men and women. The language used by the author here is very much symbolical as

well as fabricated with emotions and passions. Agastya realizes here the other world quite alike from the world of pay-commission, the Steele frame, the interim relief, the off fight paper and the efficiency bar.

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