

The Portrayal of Lost Generation in Upamanyu Chatterjee's "English, August"

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ABSTRACT: Topic- STRANGE OBSESSIONS, EVASIVE FEAR AND THE IDEA OF WELFARE STATE IN THE FICTION OF UPMANYU CHATTERJEE

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There is no doubt in saying that Upamanyu Chatterjee's first novel "English, August" is a saga of frustrated, wayward, damned souls. Reading Chatterjee's novel from the onset reminds us of 'The Lost Generation' of the 50's in England. The poems and novels of second part of the twentieth century, as we already knew were emphatically directed towards restlessness, absurdity, bleak and morbid atmosphere. The same purposelessness and cyclic journey finds its resonance in Chatterjee's "English, August".

From the very beginning of the novel, we are shocked at the lifestyle of his hero Agastya. Being an IAS officer, Agastya Das very much dissatisfied with his job at Madna, a small town in the district of Maharashtra. He recalls his childhood and adolescence with Dhruboo and the 'Salad Days' of his youth. That's why such proclamation finds fine expression in the mouth of Agastya- 'hazzar facked' in the city, etc. Agastya's indulgence of tobacco and marijuana is also hinted upon at the very beginning of the novel. The first three chapters portrayed the deceased civilization where he lives, the anger and frustration of the hero, Agastya. At the other hand, Upamanyu Chatterjee was very much conscious of depicting little minutiae in this novel. The engineer's painting and the poem that relegates the frustration presented with Agastya's 'aching joys' and 'dizzy raptures'.

The pent up feeling of Agastya can also be disarmed when Agastya has to shift his residence at Madna for times galore. The authorial voice predominantly indicates that 'homelessness of a kind' (English, August, Faber and Faber, 1988, p-5) which symbolizes the restlessness itself in his life. The glimpses of 'Lost Generation' the outcry of purposelessness is again symbolized when he emphatically says 'sitting with the three men, he was again assailed by a sense of the unreal. I don't look like a bureaucrat, what I am doing here. I should have been a photographer or a maker of ad films, something like that *Shallow and Nubian* (p-13)'. There is another piece of significant authorial comment that highlights the facts of affairs of Agastya, 'He went up on the mirror of 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 compensation 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... (P-27).

This prickly passage surely indicates that the mental condition of the hero, Agastya. Madna is a ban in his life, yet at times, he is obsessed with the town. This split personality is also a significant characteristic of the lost generation protagonists as well as of Agastya.

The chapters following also indicate the same kind of inertia and morbid tale of Agastya- the purposeless man on this terra ferma. The glimpses of the lost generation can even be seen in the climatic point of the narrative, 'But Agastya was not conscious of any blasphemy. Religion was with him as a remote concern, and with his father it had never descended from the metaphysical (p-65)'. The same authorial voice predominantly attacks even Agastya's belief and notion- syndrome that is also fluctuating with the time. Even at the end of the novel, there is no rejection or reincarnation of the seep of Agastya- he is still in the cobweb, in the whirlwind of his thoughts that are meaningless if not purposeless 'He taunted his fingers and let them collapsed, again and again. Through then, he could glimpse, darkly, fragments of two sunsets, and boatman in Japanese conical nets! These lines also metaphorically suggest Agastya's dwindled personality along with a sort of queer and covert sense of frustration.

However, the hero Agastya is such a young civil servant whose imagination is always dominated by women, literature and soft drugs like marijuana. Indeed, the novel is a funny, wryly observed account of Agastya Sen's year in the sticks. Glasgow Herald comments in its issue of December 23, 1988, that the novel is a 'jazzy, baggy, hyperbolic, comic, and crazy glamour of voices... which brings a breath of fresh talent to Indian fiction'. In the words of Jonathan Pyke, 'English, August, is beautifully written'. It is a marvelously intelligent and entertaining novel and especially fascinating for everyone curious about modern India. Indeed, the entire novel is a saga of a restless man, of a lost generation, of purposelessness, and morbidity.

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