

The Protagonist as Subjectificatory Legacy in Upamanyu Chatterjee's Novel *English August: An Indian Story*

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Abstract: The novel 'English August An Indian Story' is a beautiful raillery on Subjectification of Colonial Legacy by a postcolonial author Upamanyu Chatterjee. The protagonist Augustya Sen suffers from aimlessness in his youthful lucrative civil service job and ever refuses to pin down to any particular opinion or grand idea. He is representative of postcolonial youth of India who is shattered between aimlessness and irresoluteness. The postcolonial hallucinations though not present physically in the formerly colonized nation, traces Her through the protagonist throughout his stoned days in remote Madna, as if the colonial power, (as cited befittingly by Canadian critic Stephen Slemon), inscribed on the space of Others (protagonist as representative) and continues as an often occulted tradition. The paper will put forward its argument on the basis of some eminent post colonial critic like Frantz Fanon Homi K. Bhaba, Louis Althusser, Stephen Slemon, and Edward Said etc. The paper will discuss the postcolonial ambience in the Indian psyche, legacy of European culture and succeeding dwindling position in the writing of Upamanyu Chatterjee.

KEYWORDS: *Postcolonial, Ideology, liminality, Subjectification, Subjectivity etc*

I. INTRODUCTON

Agastya Sen, popularly known among his acquaintances as August, is one of the most interesting character portrayals of Indian English fictions. The progenitor of the character, Upamanyu Chatterjee, explores the subjectivity of this irresistible protagonist through multiple angles and enables his readers to accept the fact that he is not merely a protagonist of amusement at the surface level but a potent representation of postcolonial subjectificatory legacy. He is the offshoot of colonial domination in India and a perfect interpellation of colonizers' ideological subjectification. The liminal position of Agastya Sen is reinforced throughout the fiction where the readers and the protagonist himself poise the Cartesian question 'Who am I' in order to establish 'I think, therefore I am'. His individual 'self' that can stand apart from the world by employing intellect and imagination is lost within himself and keeps loitering in the hinterland of Madna. His identity is blurred befittingly like the Freudian theories of unconscious dimensions of the self that loses the distinction between the subject and object. His 'identity' remains undetermined though he is conscious of himself as social 'being'.

English August: An Indian Story (1988), the debut novel by Upamanyu Chatterjee, is a realistic and graphic representation of postcolonial India. It is a powerful delineation of social taboos, corruptions, impractical and superstitious outlook, opinion, crippled government machinery, muddled politics, plagued developmental programmes, changing concept of educated youth from abroad and home. The novel is construed with temporal and spatial ambivalence where the protagonist is webbed with all the fragmentations associated with the typical postcolonial Indian culture and society. Agastya Sen, known as 'August' in his friend circle and lovingly as 'Ogu' in his relatives, is an elite metropolis and a recent college graduate who joins as an IAS officer in the Indian Administrative Services. His father Madhusudan Sen, with excellent ascending track records of high profile, is the Governor of Bengal. His father is a Bengali Hindu of Bengal but his mother was a Goanese catholic. Unfortunately, his mother died of meningitis when he was merely a three years old. Thus he is partly a Hindu and partly a Catholic. He was brought up by his aunts and his educational pursuit takes him to Darjeeling, Kolkata and Delhi where he comes across a number of cultural heterogeneity. Later on, these aspects trigger into the process of acculturation that helps him emerge out as a new hybridized 'self'. His stay at Darjeeling during his school days makes him encounter with the Anglos and Tibs with their typical life style, mode of entertainment with guitar and sex gossips. His middle adolescent period spent in the metropolitan cities still continued the colonizers' ideological issues with high esteem. When he attains twenty four years old he cracks lucrative civil service examination. An IAS Officer Job in India is a promising opportunity to groom work culture among the masses. But as he arrives at Madna, the place where he is posted for a period of full one year, he wretchedly falls under aimlessness and sense of dislocation. The tone is already set in the very beginning chapter of the novel when we find Agastya along with his friend Dhruvo, a Ph.D. awardee from respectable Yale. Both of them are on their lethargic drive at early dawn with their usual marijuana in the street of Delhi.

Dhrubo is conscious of the fact what situation might happen to Agastya as soon as he joins his duty as an IAS officer of Madna. So he says:

“Out there in Madna quite a few people are going to ask you what you’re doing in the Administrative Service. Because you don’t look the role. You look like a porn film actor, thin and kinky, the kind who wears a bra. And a bureaucrat ought to be soft and clean shaven, bespectacled, and if you a Tamil Brahmin, given to rapid quoting of rules. I really think you’re going to get hazaar fucked.” [English August, 2-3]

Agastya is an incompatible into the role assigned to him as a highly educated and new representative of postcolonial India. This should have been the rarest of the rare opportunities for an educated person of a politically decolonized nation to emerge out from century old colonial domination by setting an illustration of efficiency and utmost service to the nation. But he is intrigued with aimlessness, confusion and irresoluteness. When he arrives at Madna, he absorbs himself into midnight/daylight fantasies, pot-smoking, alcohol, cigarettes, Marcus Aurelius, masturbation, hunting for wild marijuana and music albums of Jarret. He himself admits his misfit into the role when he replies to Dhrubo in Delhi before joining at Madna: “I’d much rather act in a porn film than be a bureaucrat. But I suppose one has to live”. [EA, 3] His acceptance to this civil service job is a kind of compromise partly due to compulsion and partly for familial pressure on the other. But this would be just a superficial observation because it is the interference of the ‘Other’ into his ‘self’ that draws him to this deep abyss of dislocation within his own society or the nation itself at large.

The protagonist Agastya, since his school days at Darjeeling has imagined and imitated to be a ‘self’ encapsulating himself to the ideologies of the ‘Other’. He had the desire to become an Anglo. He even wanted to change his typical Indian Bengali name to some ‘Keith’ or ‘Alan’. When he was at Darjeeling among the Anglos and Tibs along with his friend Prashant, his inner thoughts are peeled off by Chatterjee:

“Agastya’s envy had been blurted out; he wished he had been Anglo-Indian, that he had Keith or Alan for a name, that he spoke English with their accent. From that day his friends had more new names for him, he became the school’s ‘last Englishman’, or just ‘hey English’ (his friends meant hey Anglo’ but didn’t dare), and sometimes even ‘hello Mother Tongue’- illogical and whimsical, but winsome choices, like most names selected by contemporaries.” [EA, 2]

The formation of Agastya’s subjectivated identity though cannot be related straightway to the Freudian Mirror stage but can be assumed it’s stemming from the elite society and family which he belongs to. The theory sustains that the laws of language are metonymic in nature where the complex laws of culture, rules and conventions move towards subject and through which it obtains identity. Such conjectures as enhanced by Lacan were further conceded by the feminist critics like Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray which can be co-related with regard to Agastya Sen as well. It helps us to emphasize the aspects of pre-oedipal language and its potential for the development of Agastya’s identity. We can rule out the perspective that the subjectivity of Agastya Sen is constructed at the backdrop of westernized historical, social and cultural system of knowledge. Michel Foucault in his *Discourse* elaborated that a subject is equally dependent upon the rules of the system of knowledge that produces it. Agastya Sen is brought up in that nation where postcolonial history, culture and system of knowledge continued to be an ideal among the many elite educated class. His social being is a construct of that ideology. Louis Althusser points out that ruling class rule as thinkers and producers of ideas so that they determine how the society sees itself. For him, ideology is not just a case of imposing ideas on the weak subjects but they are ‘born into’ ideology. [Althusser, 37] They discover their subjectivity as expected by their parents and their society and they conform to it because it offers a kind of security and a sense of identity as well. Agastya Sen blooms at such a point of time when the ancestors had already passed through powerful historical, cultural, social and political transformation that the effect and fascination for the colonial ruling class did not disappear at all. The flickering margins of the colonizers’ were still visible that beckoned the adolescent and the youth and also large section of educated community of postcolonial India towards it. The parenting generation retained the colonizers socio-cultural hegemony that inscribed its presence upon the protagonist Agastya Sen as its loyal legacy.

Agastya Sen is reared up in so called modern period where tremendous changes in perspective and opinion operate incessantly. The western education and culture made people quite skeptic on their indigenous social cultural and moral values. The psychology of colonial domination continues to be framing the mind sets of the people. In *The Deceivers* (John Masters’ 1952 novel set in the colonial India), William Savage, an East India Company Official eats the consecrated sugar with the Thuggs and becomes the victim of Kali’s Seductive power. Thus William becomes alienated from his Western ‘self’ and finds intoxicated by the thrill of murder and the power of Kali. But in *English August*, Agastya Sen has not lost his Western ‘self’ but lost the ‘self of Indianness’ under the Western ‘Other’. William Savage suffers from dual identity after eating goat meat contentedly and drinking the arrack. Agastya Sen on the other hand, dwindles under the western education, music, wine, porno movies, media, and lifestyle etc. William eats goat meat and drinks arrack but Agastya Sen drinks, smokes cigarettes and marijuana, watches porno. Williams’ allurements may be a sudden one or may be in a trance but Agastya’s is neither a sudden one nor a willfully chosen. Thus the postcolonial psychology that

operates within the once colonized nation as Frantz Fanon opines in his *'Black Skin White Masks'* and *'The Wretched of the Earth'* continues even after the colonial rule is withdrawn.

Maddened under the impact of subjectification, the protagonist Sen loses the sense of belongingness. He feels "as though he was living someone else's life". [EA, 5] He is the one who feels lonely among the crowd. He feels homeless and reckless wherever he goes. This kind of references is constantly emphasized in the novel: "For a year Agastya was to move from one room in a rest house (a suite it was called, for some reason, and pronounced soot) to some other room in some other rest house-Homelessness of a kind." [EA, 5] This is an allusion to the protagonist's dislocation from culture and society that he belongs to. His madness, aloofness and the sense of homelessness are signs of depersonalization. Referring to Albert Memmi's comment, Ania Loomba summarizes the situation in terms of European individual in the following manner: "The individual European faces the alien hordes, and if he identifies too much with them, he transgresses the boundary between 'self' and 'other' and regresses into primitive behavior". [Loomba, 118]

But Agastya is neither a 'primitive' nor a 'neurotic' for the civilized. He is partially civilized in his outward appearance and partially 'neurotic' in his inward 'self'. He can neither possess the indigenous cultural heritage nor can he master the subjectificatory legacy in his identical possession. If we consider him to be neither primitive nor neurotic then who is he? Is he a hybrid of colonial impact? The psychological observation is quite problematic similar to another character Bhola of *'Weight Loss'*. Agastya himself expresses the three types of living that he leads at Madna:

"He realized obscurely that he was to lead at least three lives in Madna, the official, with its social concomitance, the unofficial, which included boozing with Shankar and Sathe, and later, with Bhatia, and the secret, in the universe of his room, which encompassed jogging by moonlight. Each world was to prove educative and the world beyond Madna was continually to interrupt and disturb him, through letters and the radio, and through ungovernable memories." [EA, 48-49]

He is already shattered with three role playing though without any interest of the either. Besides, the world outside Madna constantly disturbs him through number of agencies. But all the way he feels doomed at the cost of his own plight and inner conflict. The life of Madna and the life outside it tear him apart incessantly that leads him to nowhere but remain hanged in between a typical condition of Homi K. Bhaba's 'interstitial passage'. [Bhaba, 4] He is hung 'between sensate and the subliminal'. The colonized subject of Agastya Sen dwells in the liminal space between colonial and non-colonial identity. If the state of Agastya Sen is judged through Bhaba's conception who underpins that liminality and hybridity run hand in hand, then he is obviously a protagonist of no specific identity.

The character of Agastya Sen by Upamanyu Chatterjee is painted as a scapegoat of colonial legacy in the postcolonial phase in the guise of a breathlessly un-surpassing sarcastic and boisterous narrative. The protagonist Agastya can easily be identified as 'continuity of preoccupations' of the colonizers' subjectivity and ideological encroachment. His late adolescence when we encounter him in the narrative is nurtured under the prevailing 'state apparatus' that cannot be dismantled at one's will. There are indications in the novel how the colonizers' institutions and practices are still continued in the late twentieth century i.e. after four decades of decolonization of the formerly colonized nation. Upamanyu chatterjee hints:

"District administration in India is largely a British creation, like the railways and the English language, another complex and unwieldy bequest of the Raj. But Indianization (of a method of administration, or of a language" is integral to the Indian story. Before 1947 the collector was almost inaccessible to the people; now he keeps open house, primarily more difficult job." [EA, 10]

The author is conscious of the existing fact in Indian culture and society all through his narrative that has plagued the generation because it 'still exhibits the accoutrements' (but now Indianised). Agastya's aimlessness and unsaturated 'inner self' are inconsumable legacy that he inherits. He loses his proper want, desire, interest whatsoever that leads him to marijuana, cigarettes, wine, porno, masturbation and moonlight runs. Though he is an elite and educated youth his adolescence frolics do not leave him. It prevents him from playing the role he is assigned to or perceiving his true identity. The yellow journalist Mr. Sathe categorizes Agastya as 'Cola Generation' 'a generation that does not oil its hair' (probably implying western hippy culture that was dominant during that period as represented in the media and films of the time). Agastya's uncle who can be regarded as one of his mentors defies his generation as 'you generation of apes'. Out of his rage he scowls: "The greatest praise you mimics long for is to be called European junkies. And who is August? In my presence, call him Ogu." Thus, his name itself is a metaphor in this novel. His name is an old fashioned mythological name implying its rootedness into the age old religio-cultural heritage of its nation. It is the sacred name of very much revered Rishi, an ideal of commitment, determination and efficiency. But this name is Englishified in the novel. The sensible person like Agastya's uncle despises and protests their mimics (Mimicry?) to be the 'European junkies'. [EA, 29] When Agastya and Shankar arrange their meeting with first drink of celebration he says: "Agastya, a good name,, quite rare, means born of a jar. The jar is the womb, and thereby the mother goddess, but the jar could just as easily have contained Vedic Whisky. Soma-type, good quality Scotch, bottled for twelve

years". [EA, 28] Shankar makes fun of the mythic allusion but the birth of Guru Agastya took place for a greater cause. Here the protagonist stands as belittled binary opposition to Rishi Agastya. There is sharp contrast to the connotations of his holy name to what he thinks when someone is astonished to hear his name. He is half-ready to 'It's Sanskrit for one who turns the flush just before he starts pissing, and then tries to finish pissing before the water disappears' as soon as he says 'Agastya' to Mrs. Srivastav's query on his name. [EA, 54] He has no respect for his name neither his existence. His friends prefer anglicized version i.e. 'AUGUST' or just 'ENGLISH' to significantly mythological 'AGASTYA'. Akhil Sharma in his Introduction to the novel says: 'Agastya, in short, seems un-Indian to them and to himself as well times. That hardly makes him English, though, as he is perfectly aware. Inauthentically Indian, Inauthentically western: in Madna this crisis of identity comes to a head.' [Sharma, *Introduction*, xi-xii] But the title of the novel is a raillery on the 'Western August' on the 'Indian soil' juxtaposed against Indian cultural heritage and society.

The novel '*English August: An Indian Story*' is deeply a psychological disclosure of today's urban educated youth and Agastya as its suitable representative. He is a mirror to identify the subjectivity of present generation of postcolonial India. This is the mirror that 'reflects the average Indian growing up in an Indian megapolis and feeling constantly that he will be more at home in New York or London than in a small of India'. The Review of Madhuri Bite on R.P. Singh's '**The concept of Anti-Hero in the Novels of Upamanyu Chatterjee**', published in '*The Criterion*' is very suggestive of Agastya Sen's subjectivity:

"Agastya Sen the antihero represents his time, i.e., the last quarter of the twentieth century Indian urban life at multiple levels. The focus of Upamanyu Chatterjee..... like August are victims of their educational cultural nurturing."

Again,

".....one very important aspect of this novel is the message that the Indian society did not undergo cultural decolonization. The central opinion of Upamanyu Chatterjee in this novel is that the careerist English educated Indian urban youth suffers alienation at his deeper psychic level from his roots and becomes doomed to a life of unhappiness and boredom". [Bite, 2]

Since Agastya is incapable to recognize his genuine subjectivity to which his roots belong under the impact of colonial other, he retreats from any judicious approach to his assigned tasks. He better wastes his time in 'lambent dullness' as he says to himself at an important meeting of the Collectorate with the community: 'Yes, lambent dullness, definitely.' [EA, 14] The constipation due to the subjectificatory legacy finds exposure in the lambent dullness and abrupt fantasies.

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