
**AGASTYA'S EDUCATION - UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE'S ENGLISH, AUGUST:
AN INDIAN STORY AS A 'BILDUNGSROMAN'**

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Abstract: Upamanyu Chatterjee is one of the renowned Indian novelists in English today with an extraordinary talent and known for his unique sense of humour. Chatterjee, being an IAS officer, writes about the life of restless, educated urban youth against the backdrop of Indian Administrative Service. His debut novel *English, August: An Indian Story* (1988), a 'Bildungsroman' and critically acclaimed novel was later made into a successful Hindi feature film. This paper makes an attempt to analyse the novel *English, August: An Indian Story* as a Bildungsroman, also called 'coming of age novel' or 'a novel of formation or education'. Bildungsroman is a German class of novel in which the protagonist travels from innocence, foolishness to physical, psychological and moral development and finally attains maturation. In the process of the metamorphosis, the 'centre of consciousness' undergoes some hardships, loss, gradually grows and finally discovers the place in the society and realizes the purposefulness of life. Right from the Victorian period to present modern writers of English novel, this special genre had largely been exploited. Dickens's *Great Expectations*, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and many more novels are of this kind. The protagonist of the novel *English, August: An Indian Story* is Agastya Sen, aged twenty four, posted at Madna, a hot hinterland small town. As a trainee IAS officer, he is immature and unconcerned about his work. After some experiences and exposure to administrative life, he comes out of the cocoon of his ironic perspective of life and starts his quest for self-realization. He unconsciously sheds his perfunctory self, undergoes metamorphosis and slowly comes to terms with himself. Gradually Agastya gets involved in his work as a bureaucrat and prepares to serve the needy. Agastya's maturity is highlighted as he takes measures to provide water to Chipanti, an acute water-scarce tribal hamlet and later moves forward to take charge as Assistant collector at another small town Koltanga. The novel marks the protagonist's journey from innocence to experience.

Key Words: Agastya, Bildungsroman, *English, August: An Indian Story*, Madna, maturation, metamorphosis, Upamanyu Chatterjee.

The form of English novel 'Bildungsroman' deals with the maturation process of the protagonist while undergoing some experiences to attain moral and psychological development. The German word 'Bildungsroman' means "novel of education" or "novel of formation." In German 'bildung' means education or formation and 'roman' is a novel. Usually the protagonist of the novel is away from home, seeks some adventure, experiences some loss, commits some foolish mistakes, and finally reaches his goal of maturity. There is a conflict in some way or other between the protagonist and the society and in the process, the protagonist attains the maturity gradually, arduously, and starts accepting the values of the society. The society also in turn recognizes the change that takes place in him and he is ultimately accepted into the society. In some novels the protagonist is able to reach out and help others after his maturity. The term 'coming-of-age novel' is sometimes synonymously used with the term Bildungsroman. On the whole, this class of novel is a novel of metamorphosis, a change of the character for good and realization of purposefulness of life. The German writer J.W. Von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795) remains a classic example of Bildungsroman which was translated by Thomas Carlyle into English in 1824. Many British and other

writers across the world were inspired by this form of novel and created unforgettable works. After Goethe the genre has been characterized by a number of formal, topical and thematical features, its subgenres being 'novel of education', 'novel of development', 'novel of artist'. According to Buckley (1974) the Bildungsroman in English literature is "in its broadest sense.....a convenient synonym for the novel of youth or apprenticeship" (13). The type of novel that was particularly popular in Victorian England was the novel of youth. Many authors of the time were producing works focused on the journey of the 'centre of the consciousness' from childhood to adulthood. George Eliot wrote *The Mill on the Floss*, Charlotte Bronte wrote *Jane Eyre*. 'David Copperfield' and 'Great Expectations' by Charles Dickens, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and with light variations many more novels fall under this category. From J.D Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* to the present J.K Rowling's series of *Harry Potter* are of this class. This paper seeks to analyse the debut novel of Upamanyu Chatterjee, *English, August: An Indian Story* as a class of Bildungsroman. Chatterjee was born to Bengali parents in Bihar, studied at St. Xavier's and

St. Stephen's college in Delhi and later became a Civil Servant. St. Stephen's College has the unique distinction of producing many talented modern writers like Amitav Ghosh, Allen Sealey, Ramachandra Guha, and Sashi Tharoor. Upamanyu Chatterjee is presently in Delhi with the Ministry of Defence, Government of India. He has produced five major novels so far. He is a promising Post Modern Indian writer, master of English language, with a unique talent for satire, irony and writes mostly about the life of restless educated urban youth against the back drop of Indian bureaucracy, owing to his position in the 'steel frame' of the state. He received 'Sahitya Academy Award' in 2004 for his third novel 'The Mammaries of the Welfare State' written as an apt sequel to his first work English, August: An Indian Story. The novel English, August: An Indian Story is about a young trainee IAS officer 'Agastya Sen', posted to Madna, a hot, hinterland imaginary town somewhere in South India. He is uninterested in his work, reflects ironically about the people and situations around him. He is indifferent, aimless, resorts to soft drugs and secret sensual fantasies. The entire work deals with the experiences of Agastya meeting different officials of the district, visiting places, getting exposed to various departments and administration and his perfunctory response to his duty. It also unveils his secret life of 'getting stoned with marijuana', masturbation and his nostalgia for modern urban life. Though the novel lacks much action, well built structure, strategic development of plot and logical ending, it marks the protagonist's psychological growth and with some margins, the maturation process of the hero who finally gets involved in his duty and tunes his mind to rise to the occasion that forms the core of the narrative. According to Sengupta (1994): "the novel describes a journey-sometimes pathetic, sometimes humorous, and even ridiculous- a journey from rootlessness to maturity, a struggle to come to terms with oneself." (110). the protagonist appears to be childish, immature as he talks to his college mate Dhruvo when both were doped up before he leaves for Madna. In the novel Dhruvo says: "August, you are going to get hazar fucked in Madna (Page.1), you look like a porn film actor, thin, kinky..... I'd much rather act in porn film than be a bureaucrat. But I suppose one has to live" (3). He considers the position as an IAS to be less desirable and prefers a stupid option, revealing his hazy vision of a career and life. When District Collector of Madna Mr. Srivastav and his wife ask about the meaning of his name, he is about to give an irreverent, weird meaning

"Agastya in Sanskrit, he wanted to say, for one who shits only one turd every morning" (15).

Actually he is named after a great sage from the Indian epics The Ramayana and The Mahabharata. On another occasion he is tempted to tell Mrs. Srivastav that

"Agastya, 'half-ready to answer the next question with, 'it's Sanskrit for one who turns the flush just before he starts peeing, and then tries to finish passing before the water disappears" (54).

All these reflections show Agastya as being a top bureaucrat under training, still foolish, immature in his thoughts and behavior. He is preoccupied by marijuana and masturbation to fight his loneliness in Government Rest house. Rochelle J. Almeida(2003) observes :

"Agastya- suave city slicker that he is: urbane, literate, confident- is ill-suited for the small town environment of Madna and mentality that its inhabitants possess.he expresses a desire to be in the position of other 'fortunate Indians living somewhere in the First World". (27, 31)

Agastya seems to be very puerile at school when he replies to his new English teacher about his life ambition. He says that he wants 'to be a male, domesticated stray dog as it has lot of freedom, sleeps a lot, barks unexpectedly, got a lot of sex and has no responsibility'(35). Agastya recollects how he and his school friends had an adolescent fantasy about Dhruvo's mother. Agastya is an anglophile who wants to be called 'English' or 'August' by his friends. He wonders at the buoyant life of the titillating Anglos and sturdy thighs Tibetans in his college. He even fancies some westernized names like 'Allan'. Contrastingly, to much of his displeasure his Governor father and uncle fondly call him 'Ogu' and he is unable to accept it and cherish the traditional name given by his parents. The family and society expect a young person to grow on the lines of elders' wishes, love and adopt the established ethical practices. But he seems to be careless about traditions and dreams unnaturally, exhibiting his inner conflict and culture- clash. He lost his mother at an early age, and was traditionally brought up by his bureaucrat father and uncle, but his convent education, western habits, love for English language force him to detest his own society. He expresses his disgust at the uncultivated behavior and habits of the Madna people, inculcates an ironic perspective of life and disinterestedness towards his work and society. His ennui is the upshot of his indifferent outlook. He visits the houses of various officers in the evenings not to socialize and learn administrative techniques, but just to gratify his ravenous appetite and enjoy homemade dinners. One of the major features of the Bildungsroman, the conflict between self and society is evident in the novel which is characterized by a lack of seriousness. He is often careless and dishonest

in revealing facts about his personal life. He lies to his subordinates on his first day at office that he is twenty eight and married, though he is just then twenty four and still a bachelor. He says:

“She is in England. She’s gone there for a cancer operation. She has cancer of the breast’. He had an almost uncontrollable impulse to spread out his fingers to show the size of tumour...” (13).

He is quite casual, childish and cooks up stories instantaneously.

“Later in his training told the District Inspector of Land Records that his wife was a Norwegian Muslim..... His parents were in Antarctica, members of the first Indian expedition. Yes, even his mother; she had a Ph.D. in oceanography from Sorbonne. After a while the personal questions stopped. Later he felt guilty, but only for a very brief while” (13-14).

He meets the collector of Madna, Mr. Srivastav for the first time after he ‘gets stoned with marijuana’. The other day on his way to meet the Superintendent of Police Mr. Kumar, he observes the wild cannabis on the road side and pockets some leaves. He is not interested in attending the official meetings and tries to avoid them on the smallest pretext. He concocts some funny and nasty lame excuses to be away from the office. His sense of dislocation, general tedium make him reflect in an ironic tone keeping himself away from the real happiness of life that comes through the sense of accomplishment. The novelist writes: “Anchorlessness- that was to be one of his chaotic concerns in that uncertain year; battling a sense of waste was to be another. Other fodder too, in the farrago of his mind, self-pity in an uncongenial clime, the incertitude of his reactions to Madna, his job, and his inability to relate to it- other abstractions too, his niche in the world, his future, the elusive mocking nature of happiness, the possibility of its attainment.(25) Agastya writes a letter to his father “I’m sorry....I just can’t get used to the job and the place. I’m wasting my time here, and not enjoying the wasting. That can be a sickening feeling. (131). Instead of getting involved into work, honing his administrative skills, he thinks of joining in a publishing company in Delhi as an editor or a journalist which is a desperate remedial option for a young bureaucrat. When his uncle comes to know about his ridiculous choices, he lashes at his sense of immaturity and his father tells him often ‘give time to work’ so that he would settle. He is too self-obsessed to mingle freely in the mainstream of the life and the society as he feels that he is forced to live in a universe which is alien to him. Jayaraj (2005) raises a pertinent point:

“But the heroes of Chatterjee fail to rest their convictions in a meaningful context. His inability to relate himself to his job is to be considered in a larger

frame work where he questions his niche in this world”. (3)

Chatterjee, instead of portraying the protagonist as a child, as it appears in many traditional ‘coming of age’ novels, introduces Agastya at the age of twenty four, after getting recruited into administrative service. Hence the focus is on the psychological and moral maturity rather than the physical growth. The protagonist is already twenty four, well educated, got into a promising career, yet immature, foolish at times, reflects ironically at every situation. He confronts the ideology of his father, kaka and other officials about his stay and work at Madna. His childish behavior is apparent when he steals the car keys of the Collector. He just visualizes how Mr. Srivastav would shout at his driver and laughs at it. It is indecipherable to the readers about how such a young man, a trainee IAS could be so mischievous; steal the keys of his senior. It is not the thief in him that makes him steal, but his boredom at that small, strange, ugly town and his aimlessness in life and later ‘he laughed silently at the meanness of his action’ (215). Outwardly he appears to be a knowledgeable, talented, suitable for a higher position in the society. But his inner self still needs efflorescence, commitment and honesty to hold such a noble responsibility. At the same time, he is not unaware of his juvenile, enervating thoughts and actions. His attempts to come to terms with himself are mostly shrouded by his listlessness and the modern urban lifestyle that he misses at that small town and he needs a thrust and real challenges in life to carve a niche for himself.

“.....Post Modernism presented an argument for sensuous response and the languages of the body over intellectual analysis. It declared itself for open randomized and popular forms and looked to an alliance with counter culture of youth, drugs, Rock and Roll and a new erotics in a deliberate affront to the decorums and hierarchies of literary establishment”.(2)

Agastya takes some time, waits for a certain occasion to prove that he is not far away from the reality and make his life meaningful. He is not entirely reluctant to change for the better, and to discover the purpose of his life. He appears to have a ready mind to change as he reads The Bhagavadgita, listens to Tagore and reads the classic The Meditations by Marcus Aurelius, the great second century Roman emperor and philosopher. In fact he inherits the hobby of reading Marcus Aurelius from his father. Despite his evasive nature and drugs, his hobby of reading classics, trying to understand great philosophers show his sprouting spirit of awakening and his quest for self-actualization. After visiting many district officers, spending some valuable moments with Govind Sathe,

a local journalist and cartoonist, Agastya involuntarily starts getting adjusted to that small town of Madna. He observes the dire living conditions of people, their long hours' wait at the government offices, and their struggle for existence. On his return from Delhi after spending Puja holidays, he finds Madna a familiar place.

Chatterjee writes:

"... At the railway station the beggars squabbling around the taps, their language now no longer so alien..... Everything unchanged, as though time itself had accompanied him away from Madna" (178). Later Agastya accompanies an English man John Avery and his Indian wife Sita in search of the place where his grandfather the Senior Avery, officer of this area three generations back during British rule, got killed by a tiger in the forest. Agastya is really impressed by the couple, their balanced talk and determination in the pursuit of contentment through work. The encounter with the Averys definitely provides him with an insight to estimate himself in the society and devote time to his work. The remarkable change occurs in his life when Agastya visits Baba Ramanna's Rehabilitation Home for lepers. 'He spends more than four hours at the place, and quite enjoyed himself.(223) He, who was once disgusted to look at the poor and the dirty, takes dinner now at the Home, food served by lepers who are getting healed. He talks to Raman Kranthi, the doctor son of the Baba who devoted himself to the service of lepers. This incident makes him realize the significance of contentment in serving the destitute. This novel experience diverts his mind from indifference, lethargy to the sense of duty and inclination to work. In this context, the author writes,

"...as Agastya stared at the fields and orchards, and the two wells, phoenixes that the Baba had helped to rise in triumph out of barrenness, he felt a little sick-at the immensity of a human ambition, but also at its nobility and virtue at the limitlessness of the potential of human endeavour, but also the infinite patience and craft required to bring the endeavour to fruition." (235-36).

He finds a board above a hut at Rehabilitation Home that reads

"The weak became strong on Tolstoy Farm and labour proved to be a tonic for all" (237).

Later he shares his opinion with his girlfriend Neera about human service that

"....he envied Baba Ramanna and the Naxalites of Jompanna not their nobility of purpose, but their certitude in knowing what to do with themselves."(238).

This incident reveals that the protagonist's realization of futility of a directionless life has started changing

to find new vistas of utility, purpose and fruition of life. Agastya as Block Development officer at Jompanna hopes that things will be better; he will be able to settle down to the job.

"Everyone had said that it would be challenging, involving and perhaps his restlessness would dissolve in action" (253).

The first sign of metamorphosis is witnessed when he says these words as a step towards usefulness of his existence, getting involved in his work, his sense of accomplishment that are going to be the guiding force in Agastya a man of work and society. Though he says he had half mind to his work,

"he picked up a few habits of the district officer, of eating two stupefying meals a day, of bringing some files back to his Rest House room"(253).

His realization of the sense of duty, coming out of his lethargy is exhibited at the episode of providing water at Chipanti an acute water-scarce tribal hamlet. He is shocked to see the people drawing mud from a deep well. Moved by their plight, he stays a full day there, and convinces his subordinates to fetch water tanks on war footing. He also arranges to excavate the well and provide water to the tribal village. It seems that he is highly self-motivated after his visit to Baba Ramanna's Home and turns to be a life-giver to the remote, uncivilized water-starved habitants. Murari Prasad comments:

"Agastya appears to be close to changing his mindset after a visit to Chipanti.....moved by the plight of the hapless women..... for a while he is recklessly honest."(Prasad43)

Later the officers and citizens of the Block observe that:

"...the Block also thought of him (Agastya) extremely efficient, and its people said to one another, IAS, after all. He did work reasonably hard; there wasn't much else to do there."(270).

His journalist companion Sathe takes him to a place of Sadhu. Though they could not meet him, Agastya observes the clean water, serenity of the place and evinces his interest to meet him later. At the end of the novel, we perceive a sea of change in the attitude of the protagonist regarding his sense of duty and empathy for the people around him. Sengupta(1994) observes:

"There are other clues that point to a slow metamorphosis taking place in the character of the protagonist. Agastya, a specimen of the 'the generation that does not oil its hair' makes friends with Sathe, the cartoonist, who seems to bridge the gap between Agastya and his father, with the grim present and nostalgic past. And it is Sathe who helps the protagonist to slowly come to terms with himself ...goes in the quest of the Sadhu." (113).

"First the job didn't make sense, and I thought then,

when it does, I'll settle down ...Most of time I felt guilty ... then I'd be working ...something concrete."(284).

Sathe plays a crucial role in tuning Agastya's mind, in making him come out of the dreams of mega metropolis and find his place with rural realities. Sathe encouragingly says

"But Madna is my home for me. August, in Bombay I felt lost.whatever you choose to do, you will regret everything, or regret nothing. Remember...you are not James Bond, you only live once" (285).

Later he is posted as Assistant Collector at Koltanga, ironically, a much smaller town than Madna. But Agastya does not protest; he packs for his new place, boards a train, opens his Marcus Aurelius' *The Meditations* and reads,

"...Today I have got myself out of all my perplexities; or rather , I have got the perplexities out of myself- for they were not without , but within ; they lay in my own outlook"(288).

Finally we find Agastya, a matured and blossoming mind, plunging into action to conduct himself as a bureaucrat engaged in real human service.

Conclusion: Agastya consciously and mostly unconsciously fights his sense of futility, ennui at Madna , comes out of his innocence, dilemma and attains maturity and moves on to take up his new job, aiming for a higher mode of life, at the new place of his posting Koltanga. As the saying goes 'Every dark cloud has a silver lining', The dark cloud of lethargy and tedium disappear when he sees his responsibility before his eyes. One or two challenging tasks could easily ignite such an attenuated disinterested mind to become a sensible man of understanding. Obviously, owing to his self realization, having understood his place in the society, he is going to prove that 'he works hard and never feels guilty again'. Chatterjee thus makes his hero Agastya lovable and unforgettable who journeys from innocence to experience, from self-abnegation to self-assertion. The transformation of Agastya, the protagonist in a Bildungsroman, is too conspicuous to be overlooked in the first creative effort of Chatterjee.

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