



A Comical Subversion: ENGLISH, AUGUST

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Abstract:

Literary realism attempts to illustrate life in texts without romanticizing ordinary experiences. Upamanyu Chatterjee's work *English, August* presents the people of rural India. The protagonist of the novel, Agastya, is a civil servant and he encounters the people of Madna. I propose that in the novel's postcolonial setting of rural India, the nation replicates the imperial power. The bureaucratic system in India poses as a mimicry of the imperialist rule; a masquerade of colonial modernity in India. This paper also

examines the impact of colonialism on the individual's psyche. The characters face anxiety over self in various instances as bureaucrats and individuals. This paper seeks to explain the modernist method of writing in critiquing the colonial modernity in India and the objective reality that the realist writings tend to produce. This paper claims that the novel in the style of bildungsroman is a comical subversive critique generated against the narratives of the nation.

Keywords: colonial modernity, postcolonial writing, literary realism, bildungsroman, bureaucratic memoir, nation.

Introduction

Experimentation of the novel forms started in 1981 with the rise of New Indian Novels. The narratives broke away from the earlier traditions of Indian writing to develop into a new genre of writing. Novels contested the thematic personal and the political by drawing attention to the voices that otherwise remain in the background.¹

Published in 1988, the novel *English, August: An Indian Story*, by Upamanyu Chatterjee presents Agastya Sen---a young civil servant who undergoes training in the village of Madna. This work delineates various occurrences in Madna that Agastya attempts to handle---heat, people of Madna, and other bureaucrats. This article builds on the following questions: How does this text deal with the doctrines of idealism and materialism through the projection of the Indian administration with the novel's claim of stagnated postcolonial rural India? How can we understand the entangled terms of realism and realist through this novel? In a postcolonial setting of India, is a realist novel mimesis or verisimilitude?

This paper questions the realist construction of the novel interweaves the larger questions of nation, self and colonialism

¹ Iyer, Nalini. "The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980s (Review)." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2, 1991, pp. 334–35. DOI: [10.1353/mfs.0.0350](https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.0.0350).

through modernist narrative techniques. Literary realism holds that the character is more important than the plot. While contextualising the novel *English August*, this paper places the bureaucratic system also as a character. The textual form can be essayed as the tool used for subversion and critique of grand narratives of the nation. The novel emphasises on the concrete experiences of the characters in Madna in opposition of romanticising the nation's replication of imperialism through bureaucracy and the bureaucrats. The dialectics of the real are emphasised by placing the protagonist in conversation simultaneously with Madna, Bhagvad Gita and Marcus Aurelius.

Indian Administrative Service

In the 30th anniversary edition, Akhil Sharma contextualises the text in the introductory note, 'The reason *English, August* was such a popular success probably has to do with the Indian Administrative Service. In India to belong to the IAS is a little like being a movie star'².

Indian Civil Service holds a prominent position in the minds of people as an imperative tool of administration. Indian Civil Service has always been understood as a skeletal framework for the social and political integration of the Indian setting. 'You will not have a united India if you do not have a good All-India Service which has independence to speak out its mind', said Sardar Patel, in his speech to the Constituent Assembly, 1949. However, in the context of British Raj, the expression 'steel frame' denotes the speech in the British Parliament, 1922, by the then Prime Minister of United Kingdom, Lloyd George— 'If you take that steel frame out of the fabric, it would collapse. There is one institution we will not cripple, there is one institution

²Sharma, Akhil. "Introduction." *English August: An Indian Story*, by Upamanyu Chatterjee, New York Review of Books, 2006, vii-xiii.
<http://www.nybooks.com/media/doc/2010/02/09/english-august-chapter.pdf>.

we will not deprive of its functions or of its privileges; and that is the institution which built up the British Raj- the British Civil Service of India³.

The bureaucracy⁴ and the individuals that form the administrative system are placed in correspondence to critique the colonial modernity in the Indian scenario. The system of bureaucracy is brought to the forefront but as an inefficient arrangement. However, this characterization of bureaucracy as retrieved from the characters of the text is exclusively constructed on individuals---the officers and bureaucrats--- rather than the system itself.

Presented in the style of the coming-of-age novels, this novel subverts the grand narratives, sketching a bored and depressed protagonist whose interests are literature, women and marijuana. The novel disguises subversion and contains it within the context of the novel.

This paper analyses the novel as a postcolonial project. One, this novel is a satire on the genre of bureaucratic memoirs to critique colonial modernity. Two, this novel adorns the features of realism and modernism to comprehensively describe individual experiences within India.

Imitative Novel

Life Histories⁵ that represent bureaucrats of the civil administration of the British Raj who continued in positions of power as Indian Administrative Service after Independence are categorized as Bureaucratic memoirs (Grewal). Most of these memoirs were

³ *One Who Forged India's Steel Frame* by H.N. Bali.

<https://www.boloji.com/articles/15210/one-who-forged-indias-steel-frame>.

Accessed 23 Oct. 2019.

⁴ Haque, Shamsul M. "The Paradox of Bureaucratic Accountability in developing nations under a Promarket State". *International Political Science Review*, vol. 19, no. 4, 1998, pp 357-372.

⁵ Arnold, David, and Stuart Blackburn. *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography and Life History*. Indiana University Press and Permanent Black, 2004, p. 5.

published after the demise of the elite administrative officials. Potter argues that the recruits of Indian Civil Service during the British rule were from families involved professionally in government service, medicine and law (cited in Grewal). These texts reveal the networks of power, patriarchy and inequalities in governance. The biographies focus on the importance of these bureaucrats especially as the men building the new Nation (Grewal). The significance of this comparison between the bureaucratic memoirs and the novel is predominantly in the temporal setting of the novel with a distinct colonial hangover.

In the Novel, English August, the author mocks the genre of bureaucratic memoirs. On the first note, the author, Upamanyu Chatterjee is a civil servant and therefore, the consumption of the work accompanied the notion of semi-autobiography. Throughout the novel, we see many intra-textual factors that are interweaved to produce a burlesque memoir of a bureaucrat. The protagonist of the novel is a trainee in the civil administration with a little amount of self-worth. He is posted in a small district town Madna, in different words, far away from political importance. The novel gives fragmented conversation among the bureaucrats within Madna that portrays their paternal attitude towards the people of Madna and the constant scrimmage between heterogenous masculinities.

Memoir: A Bureaucrat in the Making

Postcolonial bureaucracy remained influential and authoritative in Independent India with its incessant claims to a colonial version of civil service and simultaneously, its departure from the British version of the civil services. Just like the paternalistic characteristics of the bureaucrats is to be inherited from the Indian Civil Services from the British Era, so are the discussions of corruption and sexual scandal in the tenure of the Civil servants. The understandings of corruption became more popular due to the notion of accountability in a democracy (Gould as qtd. in Grewal). In the novel, Srivastav was posted as the collector of Madna after a sexual scandal involving the previous collector and Block development officer.

Another notable aspect of the novel is sexualising of women characters in the mind of the protagonist and at instances, among the friends' circle of Agastya. "Mrs. Srivastav was fat, friendly and surprisingly sexy. Throughout the evening Agastya kept looking at her thighs" (Chatterjee 53).

The author weaves the notion of civil servants as men of good character through the mentorship relations between Srivastav and Agastya. This is learned from the numerous occasions where Srivastav is praised for the changes he made in the town of Madna. Agastya compares himself to Srivastav constantly in futile attempts to learn his capacity as a civil servant. In the first meetings with Srivastav, Agastya is impressed with his knowledge base. In one instance, Srivastav warns Agastya that life is not very private as a civil servant. What a civil servant does after the office hours is not just his business. It matters to the public as every civil servant is judged for his capabilities as an administrator. A civil servant's life is thus a statement of the value and power of his authority. Grewal notes that the elite administrators formed a network through kinship to cultivate appropriate sentiments as they were mostly from the upper-caste and elite families during the colonial era (Grewal). Agastya is seen to be a valuable addition to the town of Madna as he is the son of Governor of Bengal, Madhusudan Sen.

The narratives of the memoirs focus on the making of the bureaucrat with moments of his life denoted by other prominent historical occurrences of the time. Memories of difficult childhood are processed in retrospect and they become the source of emotional strength for the bureaucrats. The maternal love showered on the bureaucrats in their early ages is appreciated for their development as a holistic compassionate individual. The memoirs do not contain accounts of the domestic life---family, religion, relatives and social lives (Grewal). However, the novel involves a trainee for the job of IAS. He remains a nobody. He is posted to an even smaller place than Madna by the end of the novel. Agastya's existence remains ahistorical and his memories of his past were always happy. The author provides information about the characters in the book through

Agastya's observation and well-knitted networks of gossip. Although just like the memoir family and religion are absent in the progress of the novel, there are multiple reminiscences of the past where Agastya as a Bengali from Kolkata⁶ and Delhi adjusts in the town of Madna. He does not remember his mother. The novel certainly confines his social life within the navigation of his escapes from the collectorate and his job. In other words, Agastya cultivates his social life as an excuse to not go to the collectorate. I argue that the author uses a non-retrospective view into the life of Agastya to heighten the affect of the critique.

Bureaucratic memoirs have two underlined characteristics---humility of the writer and the public figure's endurance especially in the face of difficulties such as malevolent politicians. The character in the memoir is portrayed as a virtuous young man steadfast to make an impact and become historical. In the narration of oneself, the character takes the role of a historian in the production of the narrative of the nation. This genre of writing takes the purpose of disavowing charges against the writer by blaming the corruption and maligns somewhere else (Grewal).

Agastya, the protagonist of the novel is neither humble nor enthusiastic about the hurdles of the job. He wants to rather discontinue his service and settle down contented with a simple life. Agastya is portrayed as an evasive character. Agastya composes various false information about his life before his training while introducing himself to strangers. The novel although mentions the temporal specifics of the day, it does not go beyond. For example, none of the letters he receives contains a date. In the ending chapters of the book, Agastya hides the keys of Srivastav's official vehicle and watches the members of the house and the driver search for the keys in a panic.

The sluggish bureaucracy is sported on the individuals such as Agastya himself in the narration of the novel. There are many

⁶ Chattopadhyay, Swati. *Representing Calcutta: modernity, Nationalism, and the colonial Uncanny*. Routledge, 2005.

instances when the protagonist evades his duty to spend the day smoking in his room or with Sathe. However, his authority as a character is situated in the incident with the tribal community within a dry section of the forest. The water well in their neighbourhood needed to be revived and to avoid the deferment of the same by the lower-level officers, Agastya remains with the tribe until the workmen arrive. His experience in the leper house exalts his characterisation in the novel. He understands the responsibility of being an individual in society. These instances of development in the novel build the ascending character value of the protagonist unlike the life histories of the political figures who always showed their brilliance and courage throughout their career.

The Political and the Private

For Arnold and Blackburn, life histories are genres that account personal lives that display the culture and social insights into individuals' perceptions of truth (Arnold and Blackburn). However, the production and consumption of the bureaucratic memoirs in India revolve around its characteristic to instruct the readers on the demarcation of private and public. It provides certain access to the matters of state and certain details of the personal lives of a public figure (Grewal). In the Indian scenario, most of the memoirs of public figures are more political than personal. Private lives of the political figures as remembered in the memoirs were always complementary to the participation in the political sphere.

Agastya's perception of Madna and the bureaucratic system provides a multitude of insights into the social lives of the people but with limited visibility due to his own experiences in the town. The distorted patterns of his sleep, the heat, frequent indulgence with alcohol, marijuana and masturbation. The reader is kept away from the administrative action. The reader is aware of the system, individual and the governing infrastructure. However, the reader is not introduced to the activities within the system. For instance, Agastya sits through month-end review meetings with the accounts department but he is not involved in the discussion. He stares at the

roof and dozes off and in many other instances, he excuses himself with a pretence of illness. Through these methods of narration, there is not much inclusion of the political in the novel.

The novel although is in the form of life history, it ridicules the consumption and the production of the genre of bureaucratic memoirs through the caricature of Agastya. The protagonist is unsure of his future. He is always disturbed and never content with his position. He emphasizes on the absences of uncertainties in the genre the life histories. The purpose of any bureaucratic memoir is questioned through the fiction *English, August*. The text is a comic production of the genre of bureaucratic memoirs that is held by patriarchy and masculinity directly inherited from the colonial power holders. The author exposes the misplaced concerns of a civil servant in the post-colonial India which resembles the lives of every man in the country. I argue that the banality of the protagonist's job as an administrator scrutinizes the abidance to bureaucratic operations as existed in the colonial era. The procedures and the hierarchies within the governing bodies are incoherent to the needs of the postcolonial India of the 1980s.

Rise of the Postcolonial State

When the government at the centre is ineffective or has disintegrated, it is understood to be a failed state. The failure is due to the irrelevance of the governing structures in the postcolonial setting (Gordon). What happens after the failure of a postcolonial state? Will people rebuild a structure of governance over their lives located in the local? The novel portrays postcolonial India as a failed state due to irrelevance for their existence. The lassitude of the bureaucratic system is well understood and they leave it undisturbed. The novel shows that the ignorance of the people will not allow them to restructure a governing body in case of state failure. The poor sanitation, dry wastelands, open defaecation are the aspects of Madna. The narrator places the culpability of the characters---the bureaucrats--- to note that the institution of administration is quite irreprehensible (Gordon).

Postcolonial state such as India is developed from the institutional framework of the British Rule. The enforcement of laws and taxes during the colonial rule was motivated by the necessity of the colonial state to remain self-sustaining. The bureaucracy then remained the tool to reach deep within the society and economy. However, bureaucracy remained an administrative tool for the postcolonial state to implement the tasks to thrive as a postcolonial state. The concept of plenary state was adopted in the postcolonial setting. The power and wealth did not cease to accumulate in fewer hands. The politics were directed by ethnicity, religion, and caste. In the novel, the administration was painted as a just-another-job such as a doctor or an engineer. The attitude of the protagonists and the friends towards the joy of living in compared to the facile job of an administrator is worth noting. This novel provides the discourse of corruption on the characters' incapability to recognize the social responsibility which falls on the disinterest towards the place. I argue that the positioning of the novel within these discourses allows the reader to relate to the known idea of colonialization. The administrative apparatus is a replica of the colonising mechanism. An outsider with some technical knowledge of administration is placed to overlook a town. He fails to understand the people. The protagonist of the novel, Agastya, a civil servant, Bengali from Delhi is a comic image of numerous British officers that India had. The constant thoughts of women and the indulgence in marijuana satirizes the impersonates the British officers. I argue that these become the most significant signs of masculinity in the novel.

Form of English, August

Realism as a genre of literature has an expanded readership with a wide social range, thus, itself becoming a project of modernity. The development of the realist novel aligned itself with the materialist understanding of reality. Realism, unlike idealism, focuses on the truth within the particulars instead of the universal conviction. It is mostly understood as a close resemblance to reality (Morris). Two terms resembling realism in art form by definition are verisimilitude

and mimesis. Mimesis is referred to as the direct imitation of actions and words. The term expanded to encompass the imitation of social reality. Verisimilitude is the appearance of being true (Morris).

Literary realism has an aesthetic and cognitive dimension that influences each other. It is founded on Enlightenment and scientific tradition of empirical knowledge which values accuracy, adequacy and truth. It uses language as a medium of communication rather than an artistic verbal display of language. It highlights the human capacity to perceive the external world. The text will be in the form that questions about the characters and situations are resolved through the process of the novel. The empirical details in the texts are factually observable events and behaviour. The language shapes the narrative around the details that are revealed about a character through the omniscient narrator. Literary realism allows the generalisation of knowledge about the world with empirical particularities (Morris).

The novel is in the style of bildungsroman or coming of age novel. Ideally, the character of Agastya evolves as the novel proceeds. There is a quest of the self that we understand is fragmented and there is a search for happiness in characters of Sathe, Agastya and Shankar. We understand the character only as the novel progresses. It imitates the life-histories of public figures and therefore, mimetic in nature. However, the novel is also verisimilitude. It presents rural India in its most bare form such as the open defecations, Vasant and his children, repetition of names of Gandhi, leprosy and the beggars. The above-mentioned instances from the novel only confirm the validity of the details provided in the novel. The dried wells in the tribal settlement, overwhelmed paperwork in the government offices, and the visit to the monument by the group of bureaucrats and their families. The language of the novel is simple and the description visualizes the scenes for the reader. Modernist⁷ passages

⁷ Head, Dominic. *The Modernist Short Story: A Study in Theory and practice*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.

transmit the reader into the midst of things. There is no objective perspective that the texts provide. Focalisation is on the subjective consciousness and the character will be comprehended wholly as the novel proceeds. There is no development of the rational self. There is no closure in the novel. The works of modernist writers are considered to be a response to the mass productions since the nineteenth century. According to modernist writers, reality is elusive, multiple and unstable (Morris).

Although the character of Agastya evolves through the novel, there is no solid development in his character. He is still confused about his options and the future of his career as a civil servant. The novel begins with a conversation between the friends smoking marijuana in a parked car under the well-lit Delhi skies. We enter mid-conversation. The narration involves speculations of the protagonist and imaginary dialogues in his head which he avoids in regular utterances/orations. The narration is disrupted often in the novel. It includes letters posted to and from Agastya to his father. The bureaucratic system is placed in the marginal space just as the Empire in the British modernist writings. The character Agastya is not a revered political figure but a self-entertaining bored individual in a languid job. This character becomes the opposite of the mass consumption of the political figure of power in the bureaucratic memoirs.

Colonial Modernity and the Novel

Intertwined networks of intellectual temperament and civilizing practices propagated through science passed onto the postcolonial setting of India. A Nation-state is planned on the foundation of technological progress and contradicting conservation of nature and forests (Philip). This picture is illuminated in the novel *English, August*. Agastya accompanies a foreign couple, John and Sita, into a tribal village. The couple came in search of John's Grandfather's experience in India as an administrator. The rational simple couple access the archives in the collectorate to find information about John's Grandfather's stay in Madna. They went to a tribal village

based on the writings in John's Grandfather's diary on an instance of hunting of a tiger in the forest. They found a stone laid in that spot for remembrance of the incidence. The couple constantly compares their known versions of India--Sita's childhood in Delhi, John's grandfather's accounts of India and Agastya's experience in Madna as a civil servant. There is a picture of colonial India and postcolonial India and the only difference in the accounts are the absence of the British- the lands are dry, people are dirty, the system is inefficient. Another deliberation in this comparison is the effort of the British in Madna. John and many other residents of Madna appreciate the endeavours of the British in the town. Surprisingly, the Indian Freedom Struggle remained distant to the people of Madna. The only reminder of the Indian Struggle for independence is the broken statue of Gandhi in one of the government buildings.

The practice of modernity in the British colonialist propaganda focusses on the role of science and the ways of knowing and the produced hierarchy in the ways of knowing. Developing the argument of (Philip), within this institutionalization of hegemony, the postcolonial state debates between the doctrines of idealism and materialism to understand the function of modernity---whether simple inversion to the pre-colonial past is adequate or whether the nation must co-opt the agenda of the Enlightenment knowledge? I note that the question that remains is what will be the recourse for a postcolonial nation in the disregard for the dichotomy of contradictions. Rejection and Acceptance of modernity based on arguments of idealist and materialist doctrines with heterogeneous experiences of people project the incapacity to redesign a model of governance that is fit for the postcolonial state of India. At the same time, an incapacity to apply the inherited models of control universally in the postcolonial state. As a result, stagnating the progress of the postcolonial state. In the field of medicine, Madna has cooperated with western medicine, the Madna hospital is always busy. The driver of the official jeep refuses to eat at the leper house with Agastya for the belief he holds about purity. The doctor at the leper house encourages leprosy patients to be independent. At the

same time, Agastya and Sathe find beggars outside the temple were affected by leprosy. When Agastya questions them on why they don't go to the leper house, the beggar scorns at him. Sathe, his journalist-friend jokes that they don't want to be encouraged to be independent because it is extra work and everyone has a different view on things and life. Srivastav holds the language of English as only a communicative medium. It reminds Agastya of the question his uncle posed him when he chose the subject for graduation as English: "Chaucer and Swift, what are you going to do with these irrelevancies? Your father doesn't seem to think that your education should touch the life around you?" (Chatterjee 59) The Indian population is not homogeneous and therefore, the realms of purely idealist virtues or materialistic sensuality or possessions will not hold. While there are material benefits of Western science in the postcolonial society, there is a constant idealist desire for a lost past (Cf. Dalley). For example, there is a conversation between the Block Development Officer and Agastya about the tribal community that is living scattered in the forest but they complain about the lack of hospital and transport facilities. According to Grove, colonial administrators propagated the conservation of natural resources in the changing global economy (Grove cited in Philip). The preservation took primacy over the rights of the local inhabitants.

Joshi argues that the Indian Middle class in North India are products of modernity- capitalism and English education (Joshi). Agastya is the figure of the Indian middle class. Both use the older resources if privilege and new organizations of social relations. Scholars of 1950s used the category of the middle class as self-explanatory. The study of the Indian middle class is parallel to the study of colonial administrators. It is considered a project of self-fashioning (Joshi). Agastya is bothered by the heat of Madna, food in Madna and the mosquitoes in his room. He compares his life to the diaries of Marcus Aurelius. Later, as he is introduced to the English translation of Bhagavad Gita, he compares both the texts. He places both the texts together in his bookshelf. While reading *The Meditation* by Marcus Aurelius, Agastya questions whether it is a western to

remain young. According to Agastya, “Marcus seemed to have more problems than anyone else- not the soul-squashing problems of being poor, but the exhilarating abstract problems of one immersed wholly in his self” (Chatterjee 69). He revisits Marcus Aurelius and Bhagavad Gita time and again, depending on the situational necessity. “Agastya had always associated books like the Gita with age when the afterlife begins to look important” (Chatterjee 83). This can be understood as divided psyche as a result of colonial modernity. There is absurd hybridity in the experiences of the characters.

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