
Comical strategies used by Upamanyu Chatterjee in his novel *English August: An Indian Story*

Mandeep Kaur
Research Scholar
Department of English
Ch. Devilal University Sirsa

Abstract

There is no doubt in saying that English Literature in India in the last thirty years has undergone a vast change. From the last decade of 1980s new ideas and voices came in a flux in Indian English Writing, especially in the arena of fiction. There are many novelists like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Chandra, Geeta Mehta, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Chetan Bhagat, and many more who explored the new possibilities of life and literature. Similarly, Upamanyu Chatterjee's fiction highlights the botched civilization with a new perspective and difference i.e. his comic vision. He uses various forms of comedy to depict the harsh realities of life. Thus, the paper makes an attempt to study that how Upamanyu Chatterjee uses his comic vision as his strategy to depict the drawbacks of Indian society.

Introduction

According to Iris Murdoch "Fiction must contain comedy if it attempts a realistic portrayal of human life," (Hague 9). As the novel holds up a mirror to life, "it is bound to have strong elements of comedy, because there is much which is funny in life, especially if we extend our definition of funny a little to include strange, incongruous, bizarre, ironic" (Hague 10). Taking a cue from Murdoch's views, it can be said that the literature of any nation or language is not complete without the genre of 'comedy'. This literary form has been well used by many writers, to expound the lighter side of the sarcastic and hideous things in our life. The novelists employ their comic vision to attack the shortfalls of the people, society and human errors. George Meredith, in *Essay on Comedy* (1877), considers one excellent test of the civilization of a country to be "the flourishing of the comic idea and comedy"; and that of the true comedy that "it shall awaken thoughtful laughter." (140) Thus, purpose of comic vision is to satirize a given circumstance and promote change by doing so. Comic vision makes fun of situations and people, while simultaneously provoking thought. It does not aim to malign in its analysis, but rather, scorn the stupidity and inanity of those involved in the circumstances. The comic artist's purpose is to hold a mirror up to society to reflect its drawbacks, in the hope that they will, as a result, be mended.

Upamanyu Chatterjee, one of the most compelling new voices in the domain of the Indian novel in English literature has a profound comic vision. He is always attracted towards the comic aspect of everyday life and expresses in his writing with conciseness, which makes him a moderate successful novelist. He uses various forms of comedy like farce, black humour, satire and irony to portray the follies and foibles of Indian society. He is a gifted writer with an extraordinary talent for irony, satire, farce and black humour. He is a great artisan of humour, satire and irony. He takes irony from the real life and views in a comic aspect. He satirizes the Indian society and the manners and life style of Indian people with the help of comical elements.

That Chatterjee is wonky and witty his readers know. His capacity for silence -- his genius for remaining aloof in the face of gibes at his or Agastya Sen's Englishness -- is unnerving. With the three weapons of an artist (according to Joyce), silence, exile and cunning, Chatterjee has his armoury well stocked. (Nambisan)

Upamanyu Chatterjee was born on 19th December 1959 in Patna, Bihar. He is the son of Sudhir Ranjan Chatterjee. He received his education from St. Xavier's School and St. Stephen's College in Delhi. While Chatterjee was in high school, he wrote a play. The play was not published at that time, but won the school drama competition. After studying English Literature at Delhi University, he joined the Indian Administrative Service in 1983 from Maharashtra Cadre. His professional career not only marked the beginning of his literary career, but also was the source from which he created his characters. In 1990, Chatterjee lived as Writer in

Residence at the University of Kent, U.K. He was also appointed Director of Languages in the Ministry Of Human Resource Development, Government of India in 1998. At present, Chatterjee serves as a Joint Secretary to Government of India in the Ministry of Defence. The literary canon of Upamanyu Chatterjee is not very large, but he is a powerful emergent voice in Indian English Literature. Thus far he has published six novels, namely *English August: An Indian Story*, *The Last Burden*, *The Mammaries of the Welfare State*, *Weight Loss*, *Way to Go*, and *Fairy Tales at Fifty* and a handful of short stories of which ‘The Assassination of Indira Gandhi’ and ‘Watching Them’ are particularly noteworthy. All of his novels have received critical and political support in spite of the fact that the novels portray the legal and political systems in a satirical manner.

There is no doubt in saying that English Literature in India in the last thirty years has undergone a vast change. From the last decade of 1980s new ideas and voices came in a flux in Indian English Writing, especially in the arena of fiction. There are many novelists like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Chandra, Geeta Mehta, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Chetan Bhagat, and many more who explored the new possibilities of life and literature. Similarly, Upamanyu Chatterjee’s novels highlight the ruined civilization with a new perspective and difference. According to Flannery O’Connor:

There was a time when the average reader read a novel simply for the moral he could get out of it, and however naïve that may have been, it was a good deal less naïve than some of the limited objectives he has now. Today novels are considered to be entirely concerned with the social or economic or psychological forces that they will by necessity exhibit, or with those details of daily life that are for the good novelist only means to some deeper end. (Hillenbrand 61)

His first and best-selling novel, *English August: An Indian Story*, was published in 1988 and has since been reprinted several times. It was said for his magnum opus:

Upamanyu Chatterjee’s affectionate yet unsparing slacker view of modern India. Most novels progress, but this one simply chronicles an ongoing anomie and spiritual restlessness. Chatterjee, though, excels in his descriptions of Indian life. (Dirda)

It was adapted into a film of the same name in 1994. *English August* is the story of young civil servant Agastya Sen, who joins the Indian Administrative Service, which the author himself joined at the same age, in 1983. Agastya Sen is sent off for a year’s training in district administration to a small district town called Madna but his imagination is dominated by women, literature, masturbation, and soft drugs. The training is a dreary part of his life so he finds it dry and tedious. He is surprised at the system of Indian civil administration. The training sessions do not develop the expected sense of responsibilities in this officer, so he thinks of leaving it in between. His associations with different departments as part of training make him a skeptic. Agastya is a rich, or at-least upper middle class youth, belonging to the generation of westernized youth who talks in ‘Hinglish’ language. He is incapable to adjust at Madna, dispassionate and uninterested in the job and his disinterestedness reflects ironically in his comments. Chatterjee makes this novel a lively satiric novel with the help of comical elements that mirrors the dissatisfaction of the modern urban educated youth and the corrupted lifestyle of the bureaucrats.

In the beginning of the novel when Agastya leaves for Madna, he talks to his friend Dhruvo who was stoned due to marijuana. Dhruvo says “August, you are going to get hazar fucked in Madna” (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) and he also admitted that “I don’t look like a bureaucrat, what am I doing here? I should have been a photographer or a maker of ad films something like that, shallow and urban’ (13). At the very beginning, the conversation between two close friends, the derisive expressions shock the readers as Agastya expresses his disinterestedness towards his job which is rooted in his mind well in advance, even before he joins it. At Madna, he is accommodated in a Government rest house, given the attendant Digambar and the cook Vasanth, who serves him tasteless and colorless food. On the very first day Agastya remarks “Dinner was unbelievable, the dal tasted like lukewarm chilled shampoo” (6). Later he says ‘... at the Rest House I seem to be eating Vasant’s turds’(49). On his first morning at hinterland Madna, he felt ‘like fallen Adam’ after being bitten by mosquitoes on cheeks, beard, ears, got his eyelids swollen and felt that “Calcutta’s mosquitoes seemed more

civilized, they never touched the face. This place has drawn first blood, he thought, wasn't elephantiasis incurable"? (7)

Black humour, one of the most important elements of the comedy takes up the common and everyday characters or situations and exaggerates them far beyond the limits of ordinary satire or irony. Even the great idols of the nation, religious beliefs, and deeply rooted sentiments of people are also satirized to bring out the humour that leaves the readers amused and at the same time bewildered. Agastya observes the Gandhi hall beside the Police station of Madna and is perplexed at its decaying stage, its broken windows, old walls and it appears to him as a sight of a 'TV news clip of bomb-hit Beirut'. He then asks Srivastav, the collector about the hilarious looking statue. "And outside, a statue of a short fat bespectacled man with a rod coming out of his arse. He asked in wonder, 'Is that a statue of Gandhi?'" "Srivastav laughed shrilly. 'Yes, who do you think?'" 'Phew. What is the rod, sir?' "Srivastav laughed even more. 'That's to prop up the statue. It fell off a few weeks after it was installed. Madna will have many more surprises, Sen'(21). In the novel at some point The Education Officer and the DDO Mr. Bajaj, taking the interview for the post of teachers and ask the candidates some questions regarding their general knowledge and Agastya also joins them, "Then Bajaj asked, 'who is called the Father of the Nation?' , 'Nehru.' A pat reply. 'I see, and what is Gandhi, then? Perhaps the Uncle of the Nation? (87). Chatterjee engenders humour from the utter negligence of the people responsible for the erection and poor maintenance of the statue and from the absolute ignorance of the prospect teachers that amuse the readers. The protagonist also laughs at his own agony, tediousness, displacement and the author says, "He realized obscurely that he was to lead at least three lives in Madna, the official, with its social concomitance, the unofficial, which include boozing with Shankar and Sathe and later, with Bhatia and secret, in the universe of his room" (48). He gives hilarious personal details and lies to everyone that he is twenty eight years old and married of course he wanted to say 'twice' , though he is just twenty four years old and still a bachelor. "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 and fabricates stories immediately. "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). In the company of the Superintendent of Police Mr. Dhiraj Kumar, he lies that he had climbed Everest the previous summer. On one occasion, in an office he is offered a plate of snacks. "On it were laddus, samosas and green chutney. He could almost hear the chutney say, Hi, my name is cholera. What's yours?" So to avoid the snack, he simply says "I can't eat anything today. My mother died today. The man looked puzzled again, 'I mean this is the anniversary of my mother's death, and I fast" (24). He tells different stories to different persons about his marital status and one day when Kumar asks him about his wife and her cancer, he says, "I am not married yet, Sir. I would've been married long ago, but my father disapproves of her, she's Muslim". But when Kumar recalls as heard that his wife was dying of cancer in England, Agastya says, "Me? My wife? No, Sir, there's some confusion that's my cousin" (109). Later, after a few days, S.P Kumar asks "When are you getting married, Sen?" 'Not for a while'. He had forgotten which story he had fabricated for Kumar" (139). Agastya is not actually possessed with lies, but his sense of displacement makes him construct the things unnerved by the consequences. When he is trapped in a helpless situation or to beat his tediousness, he just cooks up anything to come out of those circumstances, an experience that is prevalent among the modern youth.

Another fascinating childhood episode of abnormal fantasy highlights the humour in the novel. At school when his new English teacher asks about his real ambition, Agastya writes in his essay that he wants "to become a domesticated male stray dog because they lived the best life. They are assured of food, and because they were stray they didn't have to guard a house or beg or shake paws or fetch trifles or be clean or anything similarly meaningless to earn their food" (35). This is the lowest depth on, one could fall to.

Thus the bureaucrat-novelist Chatterjee justifiably uses his comic vision to fill up his maiden novel with the elements of comedy, touching upon the themes like corruption in bureaucracy, dissatisfaction among youth, typical food habits, lies, marriage, cultural clash, general feeling of ennui and listlessness making it a unique comic piece, which depicts the realities of India as perceived by him.

References

- Chatterjee, Upamanyu. *English, August: An Indian Story*. London: Faber & Faber, 1988. Print.
- Dirda, Michael. “Review”. *Washington Post*. 23 April 2006. Web. 15 Jan. 2015.
- <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2006/04/20/AR2006042001651.html>>
- Hague, Angela. *Iris Murdoch's Comic Vision*. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna UP, 1984. Print.
- Hillenbrand, Margaret. *Literature, Modernity, and the Practice of Resistance: Japanese and Taiwanese Fiction, 1960-1990*. Leiden: Brill, 2007. Print.
- Meredith, George, and Maura C. Ives. *George Meredith's Essay On Comedy and Other New Quarterly Magazine Publications: A Critical Edition*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1998. Print.
- Nambisan, Vijay. “I’m not Kiran Bedi.” *The Hindu*. 01 April 2001. Web. 15 Jan. 2015.
- <<http://www.thehindu.com/2001/04/01/stories/1301129k.htm>>