

Indian Literature (May-June, 1990)

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English, August : An Indian Story by Upamanyu Chatterjee
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EXTRACT

'Ah, yes, the rains. It should rain more, so that we don't face any scarcity of drinking water later in the year. But if it rains too much then that river will flood.' Srivastav smiled with tired complacency (a Collector's job is monumental, but Government has been wise in picking the right man for the post—that kind of smile). 'When you're Assistant Collector somewhere, Sen, you'll realize how, in a position of responsibility, you have to view things differently, in a practical way. Festivals, for instance, are not a time for relaxation and enjoyment at all.' He half-closed his eyes and shook his head, 'What we have to worry about then is law and order and the possibility of communal riot. The entire perspective changes. And we don't think of the rains as something romantic, oh, no.' Oh Srivastav saab, said Agastya silently, oh, nobler than Atlas, the burden of the world rests on you.

ALMOST half-way between Calcutta and Delhi lies the town, real or otherwise, of Madna, and it is to this town, through which the fast trains shriek their way, that Agastya Sen, the hero of *English, August*, is despatched to commence his training

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as an IAS officer. Base, petty, unimportant, dirty, Madna is a town like thousands of others that dot the Indian landscape, and we wonder why it exists at all. It, too, like Malcolm Muggeridge's Canberra, "exists without existing." But does it exist at all? No sooner has Agastya Sen, IAS, arrived at Madna than he decides that, insofar as possible, he'll live as though Madna didn't exist. He'll live, not a cat's nine lives, but three lives: "the official, with its social concomitance, the unofficial", which is only another name for boozing, and the secret life, not of a Frank Harris or a Casanova, but of a crazed man "jogging by moonlight" and stoned by day (p.48).

English, August charts the education of a young civil servant sent to a backwater town to lord it over India's 'dumb millions'. Sen's education begins on the long train ride: provincial India, he finds, insists that a man categorize himself. "Agastya? What kind of a name is Agastya?" asks his travelling companion, not unreasonably (p.4). Agastya—August to his Indian friends, who might just as well be English—doesn't sound like a name that any IAS officer would sport, certainly not any IAS officer keen on exacting respect from the common folk whom he can make or break. But Agastya, an ascetic in the *Ramayana* who gives Rama a bow and arrow, is very much the sort of name that an IAS officer should have. IAS officers are latter-day ascetics and sages: they go off into the wild, helping to develop the country, just as important as people's souls. So, when Agastya's boss, Srivastav, who walks in Madna as though he owned it, asks his newly arrived junior to explain his name, Agastya wonders whether the ignoramus's mother didn't make his head spin into sleep when he was still a baby "with the verses of some venerable Hindu epic" (p.15). Who knows whether our IAS officers would not be better administrators and more Indian if they were properly schooled in the Indian epics? On another occasion Agastya is half-prepared to answer a question about his name with, "It's Sanskrit for one who turns the flush just before he starts pissing, and then tries to finish pissing before the water disappears." Predictably, the supposedly

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cultivated wife of the Collector of Paal finds Agastya's name lovely, "really, so ethnic" (p.187). It is ethnic also to "piddle" and "piss": Agastya and his friends never urinate, much less, horror of horrors, do they say, *maine pisab karna hai*. "You are an absurd combination," Agastya's uncle remonstrates (and we can see why), "a boarding-school-English-literature education and an obscure name from Hindu myth" (p.129).

In India one cannot, however, introduce oneself merely by revealing one's name: one must categorize oneself further. Is he married or not? This question is thrown at him repeatedly, although "all references to wives" are, Agastya notes, "in hushed, almost embarrassed, tones. Agastya never knew why, perhaps because to have a wife meant that one was fucking, which was a dirty thing" (p.13). In reply to personal questions Agastya gives the most improbable answers: to one person he describes his wife as a "Norwegian Muslim", to another as an English-woman back at home to be treated for cancer of the breast, and then he has to resist "the almost uncontrollable impulse to spread out his fingers to show the size of the tumour and then the size of the breast" (p.13). Agastya describes his parents as "members of the first Indian expedition" to Antarctica and his mother as the holder of a "Ph.D. in Oceanography from the Sorbonne" (pp. 13-14). In the presence of the Superintendent of Police, he lets slip in the fact that "he climbed Everest last year" (p.22). These questions that probe into his personal life stop, "but only for a very brief while" (p.14). Such is India's relentless thrust to categorize, to pigeon-hole, to collectivize.

The first twenty pages indeed set the tone for the entire novel: the broad sweep is just as interesting. The landscape of Madna is peopled with various men of the officer class and the vast agglomeration of groupies and sycophants who gather around the men of importance like flies around "testiculate gulabjamuns" (p.27). These erstwhile dead officers and their "wives" come alive in Chatterjee's descriptions; each character is like any other, all monuments to bureaucratic existentialism, and yet no two characters are alike. There is Kumar, the

"boozing" SP Sahib, who bemoans the timidity and passivity of Indian women while he watches an American blue film, where five white girls "demented with lust" get to work on a "lucky black bastard" (p.140). Above Kumar stands the Collector, who turns out to be "that ghastly thing, a teetotaller" (p.54), and who in his enthusiastic promotion of the values of family life, wrecks the once jovial nocturnal atmosphere of the Madna Club (p. 120). And who can fail to recognize the wife of the Collector? Hearing her husband admonish the servants for their poor management of Srivastav junior, who runs around the room unencumbered by the shorts into which he has just "piddled", Mrs. Srivastav says to Agastya: "The servants always go and smoke bidis beyond the kitchen. And it's such a big house that they can't hear from there." As the narrator remarks, "In her voice was embarrassment at Srivastav's anger, pride in the size of the house, and relief that the servants did not smoke bidis *in* the kitchen" (p.56). It is not only the men of importance who are so memorably characterized: there is for example the lowly Supply Officer, "who smelt like a scented eraser out of a geometry box, to possess which, sixteen years ago, he [Agastya] and his school-friends would have done just anything" (p.218).

The government offices teach Agastya not about the intricacies of administration, but something of the "ways of the wider world" (p.71). Anchorless he had arrived in Madna to keep afloat the ship of state; and in Madna, enlivened by the company of a frog sunk in "amphibious nirvana" (p.97), he learns "the impotence of restlessness" (p.165). Life imposes its own patterns upon the living; and with the wisdom of a man whose hair is turning white, the young Agastya finds that in Madna "living had become a simpler business, gliding from day to day and discovering more and more what he did not want" (p.177). But in the life of an IAS man there can be little room for renunciation, simplicity, and non-possessiveness; and so Agastya must leave the coveted IAS, and leave it not for a job with the publishing company of his cousin Tonic, who attributes to

Wittgenstein the saying that India lives in its villages, but for the rather more nourishing tonic of Marcus Aurelius's meditations. But it is a clichéd encounter with some Naxalites and Naxalite ideology that drives the nail into the coffin of Agastya's indecision. A friend and colleague, found in bed with a tribal woman, who is not his wife, is surprised by the men of her village, who cut off his arms as a token of their visit. This man, perhaps not coincidentally, is named Mohan Gandhi. Was not another Gandhi similarly dismembered, decapitated, indeed shot, for allegedly betraying the honour of mother India and the trust reposed in him, he who was something more than a mere Assistant Conservator of Forests?

While Agastya's 'conversion' to the life of self-knowledge and contemplation is a shade unconvincing, we cannot doubt that *English, August* is a very fine novel, and perhaps it even marks the emergence of a new literary talent. Upamanyu Chatterjee shows a feel for the language, for its idioms and nuances, that is rarely found in Indian English writing. The ease with which Chatterjee writes, and the deft manner in which the story is advanced and the characters fleshed out, demonstrates his mastery of the narrative form. It is the kind of writing, very impressionistic, that in its simple imagism takes on the aspect of poetry: "New Delhi, one in the morning, a stray dog flashed across the road, sensing prey" (p.1). Elsewhere sound and light combine to create this image of a picnic spot:

Almost ten in the morning, under the sun and the faint breeze the water a vast ribbed sheet of gold and glass; a few boats, still as a painting, birds on sandbanks; from below the moist sucking sound of water lapping on a shore, and murmurs of conversation, from the village women who were washing and carrying away water. 'Eying the women, hayn?' gurgled Kumar from behind.

And where there is no onomatopoeia, there is a lively simile: "A bus overtook him, with office-goers hanging out of the door like tongues out of canine mouths" (p.168).

English, August is also informed by a very acute sense of the

interplay of *presence* and *absence* in any work of the imagination. Present from almost the very outset is a character who impinges upon the consciousness of Agastya as he does upon ours; he is present and yet he isn't: his works, paintings and sculptures, dot the landscape, but he himself is not physically visible: he is present in his absence. When Agastya moves into his new lodgings in Madna, he finds hung on the wall "what he would later call the usual improbable Rest-House painting—a sunset, and water, and therefore two sunsets, a boat, a boatman in a Japanese conical hat, on the shore two trees, like giant mushrooms." The artist is revealed to be a Deputy Engineer from Goa, R. Tamse, who spent too many days at the Circuit House away from his home and spouse. He appears again as the artist of a portrait "that could have been either Sarojini Naidu or a turbanless C.V. Raman" (p. 40), and also as the interior designer of a Rest House into which he attempted to squeeze all of India, "as though the Prime Minister spends every weekend here and needs to be reminded of national integration" (pp. 138-40). But most frequently and not inappropriately Tamse crops up as the sculptor of statues of Gandhi—many of them so deformed that a rod coming out of "Gandhi's arse" is needed to prop up the Mahatma. Gandhi like Tamse is always hovering in the back-ground: he is present in the quotations from his writings that adorn the leprosy home and in the statues of him. The Mahatma, however deformed the representations of him, can never be altogether ignored.

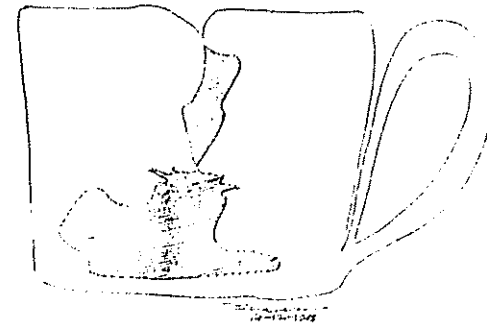
Of the humour in this novel we have already had some glimpses. The menu that Chatterjee dishes out consists not only of "testiculate gulabjamuns" but of a green chutney accompanying the samosas that seems to say, "Hi, my name is cholera, what's yours?" (p. 24). Of a copy of Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust* placed before Agastya, we are told that "many passages were underlined; all of them seemed to be about an Assistant Collector touring in the early morning to avoid the title" (p. 39). One officer seems to know so much about the personal life of Agastya's father, the Governor of Bengal, that Agastya thinks to

himself that "now he'll tell me . . . on which days in February 1953 my father didn't brush his teeth twice" (pp. 55-56). The inanities of contemporary Indian political life are well and truly mocked: thus we hear of the "Secretary, Culture", who "had single-handedly fucked up the Festival of India in Iceland" (p. 187), and of a "function to celebrate the eightieth birthday of some veteran freedom fighter of the district, who had perhaps had the overwhelming good fortune to have been jailed once with Gandhi" (p. 18). As for the stupid zeal with which American things are quickly grabbed, and the apish tendency to imitate the West, of one character it is remarked that "He's the sort who'd love to get AIDS just because it's raging in America" (p. 76).

Over the last few years we have been hearing that the English novel in India has finally arrived. The names of Rushdie, Allan Sealy, and Amitav Ghosh are routinely summoned in vindication of the view that English fiction (and particularly the novel) in India has finally shaken off the burden of the colonial connection. The English novel in India, it is said, has come into its own in its exploration of the language, its concern with heterogeneity, and its non-Western modes of representation. Can we then place Upamanyu Chatterjee alongside these novelists? And has Indian English writing liberated itself from the oppressive sexuality, not only of the nineteenth-century English novel, but of Indian society? Chatterjee's treatment of sexuality is in fact rather adolescent. About every twenty pages we find Agastya masturbating, as though that were terribly interesting, and often Mrs. Srivastav is described as wearing a "black bra" beneath a "yellow" or "pink" blouse, as though this piece of titillation were enough to drive us insensate. Much of the sexual vocabulary, especially the profuse use of four-letter words, is purely gratuitous and rather affectedly colloquial. One woman is said to "look as though her puss smelt" a type who "was willing to hump". On another occasion, Agastya is having tea and asks his servant for milk. "Milk?" asked Vasant, as though Agastya had just asked him for his

wife's cunt" (p. 26). Such instances could be multiplied: the sexual vocabulary appears quite natural, but in actuality nowhere else is it more forced. Chatterjee's confrontation with the Puritanism of Indian society and Indian English fiction leads to a rather immature revolt to the other extreme. *English, August* represents the expenditure of this excess.

"You're going to get *hazaar* fucked in Madna," says Dhruvo on the eve of Agastya's departure. "Amazing mix, the English we speak, *hazaar* fucked. Urdu and American," observes Agastya, "a thousand fucked, really fucked" (p. 1). The "we" here is only Agastya and his likes, and the world they inhabit is entirely unknown to the vast majority of this country's population. Similarly the English they speak would be quite incomprehensible to those not educated in public schools. Who else but a public school graduate, and that too one still living in the sixties and seventies, would say, 'Balls, man!'. Upamanyu Chatterjee is a St. Stephen's man, and though in the matter of getting on with life this credential is unfortunately a great asset, in the matter of writing novels it can be an overwhelming liability. *English, August* is an accomplished novel that makes for very enjoyable reading, but its failing is surely that ultimately it says so little and speaks to so few people. We can only hope that Chatterjee is not, to use his own phrase, 'anglophile to his balls' (p. 93).



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