



Humor and Idiosyncrasies in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August: An Indian Story*

Ravindra Kumar

Anupam Bansal

ORCID: 0000-0001-5712-8425

***Corresponding Author: Ravindra Kumar**, ravi15sagar@gmail.com,
Research Scholar, Department of English, Munna Lal, Jai Narayan Khemka Girls
College, Saharanpur, UP India

Dr. Anupam Bansal, Professor, Department of English, Munna Lal & Jai
Narayan Khemka Girls College, Saharanpur UP India

Abstract

Aim: This article endeavors to analyze the Black Humor, Satire, and Idiosyncrasies in *English, August: An Indian Story*, the maiden novel of the bureaucrat-novelist Upamanyu Chatterjee. Upamanyu Chatterjee takes up the common character and situation but exaggerates them beyond the limit of normal irony or satire. This kind of Black Humor he finds even in great icons of the nation, religious beliefs, and sentiments of the people.

Methodology and Approach: The study is based on the novels of Upamanyu Chatterjee particularly *English, August: An Indian Story*. *The post-colonial* approach is used here to analyze the text.

Outcome: Upamanyu Chatterjee has been blessed with a unique talent to deal with satire and Black Humor in his well-known ironic way. He discusses taboo subjects and adds elements of satire. This Black Humor springs from the ‘Ennui’ of the protagonist Agastya Sen and other young characters in his works.

Conclusion: The novel *English, August: An Indian Story* presents the Idiosyncrasies of the protagonist and effectively creates Black Humor which on the one hand makes the readers laugh while on the other hand makes a sarcastic comment on the postmodern society.

Keywords: Ironic, Black Humor, Idiosyncrasies, Alienation, Dislocation, Ennui.

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The uneasy co-existence of Western Modernity and native traditions can easily be seen in the works of Upamanyu Chatterjee, a great Indian post-colonial writer. In his writings, one notices irreverent humor and a post-colonial ironic treatment. This article endeavors to analyze the black humor and satire in *English August: An Indian Story*, the maiden novel of Upamanyu Chatterjee. He has been blessed with a unique talent to deal with satire and black humor in his well-known ironic way. He discusses taboo subjects and adds elements of satire. It makes his work satiric as well as full of black humor. This black humor springs from the ‘Ennui’ of the protagonist and other young characters. ‘According to Merriam – Webster Dictionary ‘Ennui’ means ‘a kind of feeling that comes from having too much

time on one's hands and too little will to find something productive to do. Characters of his novel express restlessness; remain alienated and face inner conflict to get their place in society.

Upamanyu Chatterjee an I.A.S officer received 'Sahitya Akademi Award' in 2004 for his third novel '*The Mummeries of The Welfare State*' written as a sequel to his first novel '*English, August: An Indian Story.*' *English, August: An Indian Story* tells us about the experiences and reflections of its protagonist when he was a trainee Civil Servant in a small town. In that small town, Agastya Sen feels alienated and lives without conviction or ambition. These are alcohol, marijuana, and sexual fantasies.

The scene he witnesses in a leper rehabilitation center changes the perspective of his life. After this visit, he understands his duties and responsibilities and gets posted as Assistant Collector in another small town, Kaltanga in the same district. Through Agastya Sen, the Hero of the novel, Upamanyu Chatterjee focuses on what goes on in the mind of the Modern Urban educated youth' – fantasies, ambition, and attraction towards the glamorous life. Concerning this capacity of Upamanyu Chatterjee Dr. Mukul Dixit says that "Chatterjee has for the first time, focused on a new class of Westernized Urban Indians that were hitherto ignored in the regional as well as the English Fiction of India." He declares that Chatterjee imagination is as fertile as Kafka's; his tragic sense is as keen as Camus's; his understanding of the absurd – comic (farce) in life is at par with Milan Kundera and Saul Bellow.'

At the outset of the novel, we find the conversation between Agastya Sen and his friend Dhruvo before the former leaves for Madana: "August, you are going to get hazar fucked in Madna" (5). "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" (7). This talk between two close friends gives the readers an idea about the reluctance the protagonist had for the job he is going to do at Madna.

At Madna Agastya Sen is provided with a government rest house where he encounters Digambar, the attendant, and Vasant, the cook. The kind of food he is served doesn't satisfy him and he indignantly says, "Dinners was unbelievable, the dal tasted like lukewarm chilled shampoo... (12). Later he says, "because at the Rest House I seem to be eating Vasant's turds (58). Through this bizarre and unusual comparison of food. Upamanyu Chatterjee sets a tone for the black humor and idiosyncrasies which he presents as the novel progresses. The first morning at Madna he feels 'like Fallen Adam'. He compares the mosquitoes of Madna with those of Calcutta. He finds Calcutta mosquitoes more civilized as they don't harm the face. On the other hand, he is badly beaten by Madna's mosquitoes on his cheeks, beard, and ears and got his eyelid swallowed 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?" (13).

The readers notice the same black humor when Agastya observes the Gandhi Hall beside the Madna Police Station. He gets bewildered at its dilapidated stage, its broken windows, old wall, etc. It appears to him as a sight of bomb-hit Beirut (Lebanon) on a T.V. news clip. Surprised he asks Srivastava, the collector about the funny-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" (28-29).

This way Upamanyu Chatterjee takes up the common characters and situations but exaggerates them beyond the limit of normal irony or satire. This kind of black humor, he finds even in great icons of the nation, religious beliefs, and sentiments of the people. In a simple incident of a teacher's interview, we

find this irony and humor. When the Education officer and D.D.O. Mr. Bajaj ask the candidate some questions. After some time, Agastya joins them, “Then Bajaj asked, ‘who is called the Father of the Nation?’ “Nehru” A pat replies. “I see, and I see, and what is Gandhi, then? Perhaps the uncle of the Nation” (99).

Agastya Sen’s idiosyncrasies make him laugh at his sufferings and sense of alienation. In the words of Upamanyu Chatterjee, “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 Shanker and Sathe and later, with Bhatia and secret, in the universe of his room” (58).

Agastya meets Srivastava and finds him unnecessarily pompous. At Madna, Agastya finds himself caught in a helpless situation which results in a sense of dislocation. It is this sense of dislocation or desperation that makes him fabricate false stories. He remains puzzled and narrates different stories to different people. He forgets the old story and tells the new one to the same person. About his marital status, he first says that he is married but later on we find him saying about his wife “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 the tumor.” 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, been only for a very brief while.” (20)

The same kind of stories he creates about his mother’s death also. Even on small occasions, he tells the people that his mother is no more but the same thing he has already told so many times. Once to avoid the snacks he avers, “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’m fast.’ (31)

Black Humor is created even on the name of the protagonist. The way Agastya defines his name or it is defined by others on mythological grounds makes the readers laugh. Agastya gives an irreverent and weird meaning to his name by saying, “Agastya in Sanskrit he wanted to say, for one who shits only one turd every morning” (22). Shankar, the Deputy Engineer in Minor Irrigation, also makes fun of the protagonist’s name. He drinks too much and prattles “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 or easily have contained Vedic Whisky, Soma-type good quality Scotch, bottle for twelve years (35). At another place, he tells 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 pissing and then tries to finish pissing before the water disappears” (65).

Taking up the Scatological terms is another unique feature that we notice in Upamanyu Chatterjee’s Black humor. He talks about the terms like bodily fluids which are embarrassing to discuss openly but Upamanyu Chatterjee is in the habit of using such ugly and taboo subject matters and exploring the village issues. After his first day at Madna, “Agastya felt unhinged..., he lay down and looked at the wooden ceiling. He could masturbate, but without enjoyment... the job was both bewildering and boring. The ventilator was open the room filled with the stench of the excrement of others when the wind came his way. My shit doesn’t smell like that (34-35).

Bringing craps and turds into the narration is quite frequent in the novel Upamanyu Chatterjee. Through this way, the author makes a sarcastic comment on untidiness and open defecation. This is his way to draw the attention of the readers toward the unhygienic condition prevailing in rural areas. A buffalo whisks its tail and deposits some dung on the arm of Agastya “Oh, you bastard, said Agastya, he scraped the dung off on a tree and smelt his arm. The stench

remained. He began to laugh, oh, how insane his existence was it ever included getting shit off his arms” (50).

Through the psychology of Agastya, Upamanyu Chatterjee highlights the amalgamation of fantasies that go on in the minds of the young generation of the modern era. One of his abnormal fantasies creates black humor which takes place in his childhood. His new English teacher asks him what he wants to be in his life. Agastya comes up with a surprising reply in an essay. He writes that he wants “to be a domesticated male stray dog because they lived best life... barked unexpectedly... and got a lot of sex.” (44)

The decay of moral values in the modern youth has been well depicted by Upamanyu Chatterjee with the recollections of Agastya. Agastya talks about his adolescent fantasy about Dhruvo’s mother among his friends openly. Black Humour can also be noticed in his conversation with Vasant. Agastya asks him to bring milk. At this in a surprising way he responds, “Milk? asked Vasant, as though Agastya asked for his wife’s cunt” (34).

Upamanyu Chatterjee, being a true Post-modern novelist describes openly such taboo subjects in a satiric way. Agastya is very conscious about his health but it is paradoxical when he takes dope marijuana and suffers from insomnia. This situation shows the feeling of sickness, disinterestedness, and meaninglessness. The sense of meaninglessness which we find in Agastya can also be seen in other characters of Upamanyu Chatterjee. P.V. Jayaraj aptly says, “the fleeting nature of happiness pitted against an overwhelming sense of meaninglessness in the dull scheme of life is felt intensely by all the heroes of Chatterjee” (4).

We find the growing lethargic sense among the educated city youth when they take up some challenges. We don’t fail to notice this sense of displacement and alienation even in the minor characters like Renu and Madan. Renu is the Punjabi girlfriend of Dhruvo. She writes a letter from Illinois in which she

mentions the meaninglessness of staying in America for her studies. Many a time in the novel she expresses her sense of discouragement and displacement. This is why she feels low all the time. Renu avers, “I wonder what I’m doing here, especially because academically this place sucks……. The worst what is not having anyone to share the absurdity…. Why don’t we learn that all changes of place are for the worse…. (175-176).

Even after getting admission to a foreign University, we find the fact that she is not ambitious about her career. This displacement in Renu is not only due to the dislike for a place and studies but it has much to do with the modern youth’s doldrums about life. When she is asked by an American if she rode on an elephant to college in Bombay. She answers, “Yes, I said, but I had to hire one since we were too poor to own our own” (176). Renu doesn’t mingle and makes friends. More often than not we find the futility and the hollowness of her life. She utters that, “to appear quiet and disinterested is the greatest defense, to convince oneself that nothing matters…. The only way to cope with the things is to pretend that nothing matters” (175-177). Renu wears a look of ‘Stay away from me’ expression for all the people and places in America. Her lover Dhruvo has the same kind of dislocation for his life and work. Upamanyu Chatterjee expresses that the modern youth’s attitude towards life and work is the same throughout the World.

When Agastya reaches Delhi for Pooja Holiday. He meets his old friend Madan, a Chartered Accountant. Madan, even staying in Delhi, experiences the same kind of hollowness of the modern youth towards life and work. In college time he used to be very lazy and wear faded jeans. But now a sea change can be noticed in his living standard and dressing sense. His job has forced him to look different from what he is. He is disgusted to be neat and clean. He says, “Because of this damn job, I have to look clean every day…. it’s sick, I think, having a job, having to work. Your whole day is gone. Every day in the office I feel as though

my head is being raped. Do you two ever feel like that?” (193). Peter Brooker observes “... Post Modernism presented an argument for sensuous response and the language 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 erotic in a deliberate affront to the decorum’s and hierarchies of the literary establishment.” (2)

Upamanyu Chatterjee uses black humor almost in all his novels strikingly. But his humor never offends or humiliates others. It seems to be a medium of escape for his characters beaten by general tedium. The protagonist of *English, August: An Indian Story* feels alienated not only from Madna where he was posted but also from the materialistic world after two World Wars. The reference to the words like ‘blood’, ‘suicide’, and ‘murder’ to the particular senses hints at the same sense of alienation. These words make their frequent presence in the narration. Agastya, on a picnic with his friends, starts cutting onions along with other men in the group. But he cuts his finger with a knife and the blood starts coming out of it. Feeling a sharp pain Agastya says, “A short sharp pain. He watched the blood well up and smear the onion. His blood looked false, he had expected it to be thicker and more maroon” (148).

It indicates Agastya is so weird that he makes the reader laugh at his own expense. He mocks at his blood. The pale-colored blood of Agastya symbolizes the worthlessness of this world and its habitats. “Agastya feels the World is not worth living...” the World isn’t a wonderful place of exciting opportunities. It is generally dull and fucked everywhere. You just have to settle down, unless you want to commit suicide (77). With these views in his mind, the protagonist of the novel is not very different from Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger and Sisyphus in the *Myth of Sisyphus*. Albert Camus says that “In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and light, man feels a stranger. He

is an irremediable exile... This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity” (77).

Many a time Agastya finds his existence on this earth useless and painful. These features are quite common in the Postmodern age so we need not get surprised at the bizarre habits or behavior of Agastya Sen. Thus, the novel *English, August: An Indian Story* presents the Idiosyncrasies of the protagonist and effectively creates Black Humor which in the one hand makes the readers laugh while on the other hand makes a sarcastic comment on the postmodern society.

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Ravindra Kumar

Ravindra Kumar is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in English from the C.C.S. University, Meerut, and also working as an Assistant Professor at Hindu College, Moradabad. He is a literary enthusiast and always remains excited about learning new things. Though he is an admirer of simplicity but loves the enigmatic nature of the literary world.