

The Novelistic Art of An IAS in India

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Article Info:

Article history

Received 18 August 2018

Received in revised form:

28 August 2018

Accepted 2 September 2018

Available online 15 December 2018

Keywords: Novelistic, art, I.A.S. realism, vision, symbolism, socio-moral, bureaucrats, Isolation, irony, embarrassing

Abstract

Upamanyu Chatterjee (born in 1959) is an Indian Administrative Servant who currently serves as Joint Secretary to Government of India on the Petroleum and Natural Gas Regulatory Board. He is a 1983 batch I.A.S from Maharashtra Cadre. He is a published author and best known for his novel 'English August' also adapted into a film of the same title. His literary taste is so amazing and appreciating that he could write many realistic novels with his hard and busy duty of an administrative official. It's another matter that Upamanyu Chatterjee is a novelist of a disillusioned age. He is by his education and heritage, a misfit in the modern world. He had a profound sense of his age. Being an administrative officer Upamanyu Chatterjee digs deep into the root of the Indian administrative system realistically. He is pre-eminently concerned with urban life. Though the places in his novels are the tiny cities and villages, but he portrays the features of big cities realistically. His novels are of streets, houses and people and not of the woods, fields and flowers. We are much impressed by his characters and their gross selfishness and sensuality. The novels of Chatterjee are pervaded by symbolism such as dissmelled steak in passage ways, of stale beer, of cocktails and cigarettes, of dusty paper flowers, of females in shuttered. These things altogether show the inevitable gloom as well as the realistic, if not naturalistic picture of a metro city, Delhi, quite apart and away from the life of Madna, the life of insanity and boredom. In a way, he exposes the reality of his contemporary society and politics as well with his own vision that's his realism and for this purpose, he employs symbolism to express the bitter things indirectly. My research paper has attempted to focus on his novelistic art of the above mentioned I.A.S.

1. Introduction

I.A.S. named Upamanyu Chatterjee who, quite alike the other novelists of his era has depicted the bleak realism and the hard times which he faces in his life. Chatterjee always wrote in an ironic mode, his brand of irony requires as its vehicle a peculiar language. It should be the language that looks playing but at the time unfolds layers of suggestions and innuendoes. He wields his ironic flail against degenerated society which has brought about socio-moral corruption in the national scene. His novels are also political and represent the political reality in a veiled form. He analyses the matrix of existence in post-modern India and finds it to be largely woven with the warp and woof mainly political in nature and traces the perversions and total loss of values in national life as well as in our personal life. He points out the ill politics which has become so all embarrassing that there is no vital area of our life which is not governed by the nature and quality of the political life and atmosphere we are creating and living in. For all the ills that we set our life, degeneration and corruption, corroding our identities, total loss of moral values, gloom and frustrations pervading everywhere. The source of the malady lies deeper and consequently does not warrant such a sweeping generalization; at the same time it may be admitted and our experience bears it out, that it is difficult to disagree with Chatterjee. Actually Upamanyu Chatterjee is a novelist of a disillusioned age. He is by his education and heritage, a misfit in the modern world. He had a profound sense of his age. He was pre-eminently concerned with urban life. Though the places in his novels are the tiny cities and villages, but he portrays the features of big cities.

His novels are of streets, houses and people and not of the woods, fields and flowers. We are much impressed by his characters and their gross selfishness and sensuality. The novels of Chatterjee are pervaded by dissmelled steak in passage ways, of stale beer, of cocktails and cigarettes, of dusty paper flowers, of females in shuttered. These things altogether show the inevitable gloom as well as the realistic, if not naturalistic picture of a metro city, Delhi, quite apart and away from the life of Madna, the life of insanity and boredom in his first novel 'English August' and the reference of 'masturbation' adds special dimension in the sense that no other novelist of the era, except Salman Rushdie makes it clear that masturbation may be, rather should be a part and parcel of life, of the young people who entered into their very youth. Similarly the passage also shows the limitation of man as he can't do anything without the

acceptance of the society. Though Chatterjee oftentimes overrides, rather excels in portraying the natural code and conduct that lies covertly in the mind of minds of young men. So also the realism is hinted in almost every page of the novel down from the first page to its ultimate catastrophe.

2. Chatterjee's second novel

'The Last Burden' is also tinged with the same reality as we find in the first novel. Jamun's story has been highlighted very realistically and in a domestic setting. How beautifully he picks up the minutiae of Jamun's day to day life. This novel shows the familial ties and the decreasing bond of relationship in this novel. The intricacies of family life have been extolled in this particular novel. Jamun's return to the family after hearing the illness of his mother shows the familial knots and yet the disruptions in it. Jamun knows it very well that it is to be a great strife to his life that he comes at a time when everything is not going conveniently. Jamun exposes his angst for the successive burden which befalls on him. The dichotomy lies in the fact that Jamun never says 'no' to the familial duties yet his inner self tries to wander like a bird in the open sky. This particular dilemma continues to the end of the novel and Jamun is caught in the whirlwind as we find in G.B. Shaw's 'Candida' where James Mavor Morell was also trapped in the same situation like Jamun but the degree of suffering is less in 'Candida' and it is much more great in Chatterjee's 'The Last Burden'. The realistic note is even continued in the successive stages of the novel which is bitterly illustrated by the author himself in the authoritative commentary. Time changes but the situation is not changing and through the intermingling of omniscient narrator and the authoritative commentaries of the novel finely explore what is it to be done in the novel. It shows Jamun's happy go lucky situation as well as the stormy self which is torn between 'to be or not to be'. The author's character-cast is so important that Jamun here finds special dimension amidst the bulgy humour and racy dialogues.

3. Third novel

'The Mammaries of the Welfare State' is even more realistic but the realism is quite different here. This is the first Indian novel where bureaucratic hierarchy has been explored in its detail. The limitations of the bureaucrats have been discussed at length; so also the red-ribbon in the government works and the idiosyncrasies of bureaucrats have been highlighted throughout the novel. Agastya's arrival and the meeting with Daya have also been given special attention in this novel. We see the growing intimacy between Daya and Agastya but the more important fact is that the relationship is established in such a way that it gives relief rather comic relief to Agastya's overburdened mind. Similarly, the shabby duties of Agastya have been hinted out realistically. Rightly says Vasabraj Naikar, "The entire

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novel is a galaxy of odd events and glaring circumstances and shows the insanity and the disorder of governance and of Agastya." As the novel advances forward the intimacy between Daya and Agastya becomes more prominent. The novel shows the colour and variegated life of Madna as well as of Agastya. Similarly, bureaucratic life has also been portrayed with accuracy. Being an administrative officer Upamanyu Chatterjee digs deep into the root of the Indian administrative system, rather we may say that, it is a satirical portrait of the Welfare State that is India. The lackadaisical atmosphere of the governance and the indifferent attitude of the bureaucrats have been finally explored page after page in this novel. The loneliness and boredom have also been hinted in this work, quite like the very first novel of Chatterjee where also the solitariness of Agastya finds a fine expression. A character named Bhola's crippling obsession with sex becomes a burden to him but the novelist has finely explained the reality behind it. It is a real novel with a black-humour and absurdity and so it is very compelling. Indeed, it is a novel of angst and anger, medley and malaise, tension and terseness—amidst all these things Bhola's character is blooming up and becomes larger than life. Being a post independent novelist, Upamanyu Chatterjee tries to bring out all the nuances of human life and the complex mind of the people at the verge of twenty first century. Reality is a theme; rather a motif in all the novels of all the novelists writing in India about the diasporic experiences of the country but Chatterjee's treatment of reality is distinguished in itself because of his intermingling of gloom and goodness, tragedy and taciturnity. His insight into the characters is more real than any other novelists of the time. All his novels are a psychological odyssey that can only charm and amuse us. Thus we see his realism and now it's a turn to throw light on his symbolism.

Undoubtedly in the dictum what French critic Buffon asserted long ago 'l style est l homme meme' ('style is the man himself'). Though the dictum became a cliché in the arena of twenty-first century English studies, yet the dictum has its resonance in Upamanyu Chatterjee. Generally the students of literature begin their respective English studies at the graduate and post-graduate levels with Francis Bacon who happens to be the most economical writer till now (in respect of word-placement and syntactical pattern) in English literature. Time passes and trends also change with the changing of time, still some basics never change. Image and symbols are the basic tenets, rather the primary pillars of stylistic motif of a writer whether he/she is writing in English or in other vernacular. As man becomes civilized through a gradual process of adaptations and evolutions, so also the case with the history of creative literature. It changes its colour and shape according to the visions and voices of a particular author. There is a distinguishing method, rather a stylistic motif of all writers; everyone is special in their own way.

'English, August', Upamanyu Chatterjee's first novel shows the author's unique way of handling images and symbols. The very first paragraph is ominous for Chatterjee starts with a quotation from Macbeth where the witches' words prove to be supernatural. In the very third line of the novel Dhruvo's query, "So when shall we meet again?" finally records the uneasiness as well as the dreary world of Agastya. In the same way the use of Indianized English words like 'hazaar fucked', 'horny women' etc. prove to be very symbolical as the novel advances forward. In the second page Chatterjee employs the symbol of eroticism when he, at length, describes his own childhood experiences at Darjeeling with Tibetan girls. Then again the detailed description of Madna and the references of Ramayana and Mahabharata symbolise the kinky rural atmosphere where Agastya was bound to stay. The allusion of 'the fallen Adam' in the seventh page shows his acquaintances with English literature and Christian mythology as well as holds up the mirror of Agastya's terrible feeling and disgust at Madna. Similarly, R. Tamse's poem influences him a lot because it symbolises longing, remembrances, pain and compulsion:—"Away from my old life and my spouse, So many days at this Circuit House, Away from Goa, my dear home, On office work I have to roam." This rhymed verse, though seems ridiculous and odd yet, symbolises isolation and the pent up feelings which are the characteristics of a post modern man. Chatterjee is also a fine critic when we find his sharp criticism on the grotesquery of governance.

The sense of purposelessness is writ large in the novel:—"Sitting with the three men, he was again assailed by a sense of the unreal. 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. It symbolises the boredom of Agastya at Madna. As the novel advances forward we find thousands of some images that symbolise Agastya's negation and anxiety. In the Glasgow Herald Review Prof. Mike Peterson comments, "Each and every line of English, August is a symbol in its own way. The novel is a jazzy, baggy, hyperbolic, comic, wryly observed account of Indian bureaucracy and its dismal state of affairs as well as Agastya's myriad minded nature." Chatterjee further traces the point that Agastya is in a dismal condition. The catastrophic ending of this novel and Upamanyu Chatterjee finally sums up the dismal state of affairs and the inferno in which modern man lives. The commentary as well as the authoritative moorings in the novel show the calibre of Chatterjee in the sense that he is a master craftsman dealing with images and symbols. The images are very much curt, graphic, hostile and at times it seems to be more morbid in the sense that the author's own sense-perception is also involved in the novel.

4. Next novel

'The Last Burden' similarly projects the same symbolic fabric. The very beginning of the novel is paradoxical in the sense that Jamun reads the life of Mahatma Gandhi and his ideology whereas he hesitates himself to open up his mind. The stray images in this novel hint out the morbid as well as purposeless world of Jamun. The particular images like the honking of lorries, tint of ashes, liquor joint show the frightful nightmare as well as the disappointment of Jamun at the very beginning of the novel. Similarly in the second-chapter entitled 'A Maroon Cinema Hall, and Aya's Passing' the symbols become more grave in nature. Jamun is also a symbol in this novel. He is the central character but he symbolises the adrift nature of a young man. Through the character of Jamun, Upamanyu Chatterjee tries to hint up the very purposelessness and the waywardness of the angry young man. His family also lives in a conundrum which can never be understood if you don't go through the novel in detail. His love for Kasturi and his association with Kasturi compels him to stay to his own house with the family. In his imagination he associates himself in a forlorn way with Kasturi and the poignancy of the imagination is increased because of Kasturi's coming into the city. Kasturi's pregnancy is very much symbolic in the life of Jamun because he has having the opportunity to become close with Kasturi. The novel shows the disappointment of Urmila that Chatterjee finely discloses through the graphic images in the third chapter of this novel. Chatterjee's instance particularly in this novel compels us to recall the great American dramatist Arthur Miller whose play 'Death of a Salesman' is also entangled in the same family coweb like Chatterjee. Indeed, 'The Last Burden' is full of naturalistic images, rather a camouflage of different word-pictures. The same train of thoughts even continued at the catastrophic ending of the novel. Rightly asserted by Firdaus Kanga in 'The Tribune' that "Chatterjee is a mercilessly gifted observer. Basically the novel is about the family disturbance and insane modalities of a family. Though structured in a middle class family ambience, yet the character of Jamun becomes larger than life because of Chatterjee's glaring symbols and images. In his other novel symbolizes Upamanyu's bawdy, the very sexuality that is involved with post-modern men and women. The language used by the author here is very much symbolical as well as fabricated with emotions and passions. Agastya realizes here the other world quite alike from the world of pay-commission, the steele frame, the interim relief, the off fight paper and the efficiency bar. He also realised the Welfare State that was truly everywhere and it is not clumsy at all. The height of sarcasm in the form of dispersed images is evident. His last novel 'Weight Loss' states the condition of Bhola in a symbolic yet lucid narration. Here the images Chatterjee uses are graphic and very much sensitive as example, 'pale blobs on his thorax', 'sold his soul to the devil in return for some pectorals,' etc. These images altogether bring out the very time through which Bhola undergoes in his teens. Rightly asserted M.K. Naik in his article 'Quest for Identity in Upamanyu

Chatterjee's 'Weight Loss' that, "Bhola himself is the symbol of dejection and degeneration, of shock and violence in the novel"

5. Conclusions

In this way, my research paper has successfully proved and clearly shown an I.A.S. Upamanyu Chatterjee's novelistic art that's superb, amazing and impressive due which his novels could achieve worldwide appreciation.

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