



From Mimicry to Mockery: A Reading of Upamanyu Chatterjee's IAS Novels

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Abstract— The day-to day micro-governance of the world's largest democracy is performed through the multi-tiered machinery of the Indian Administrative Service which was established by the East India Company as the Indian Civil Service in the late eighteenth century. Ontologically perceived, it is an immensely complex system, devised by the administrators of a colonial government to rule a group of 'natives' with whom they had hardly anything in common. The inevitable heavy influx of Indians into the service post-Independence has only accentuated its hybrid nature. This article seeks to understand the hybrid nature of this system and its representatives through the fictional representation by Upamanyu Chatterjee of the "steel frame" of the welfare state. In Upamanyu Chatterjee's novels, *English, August* (1988) and its sequel *The Mammaries of the Welfare State* (2000), the protagonist, Agastya Sen, an IAS officer, is a classic representation of the hybridity of the system that he serves. Burdened with the name of a mythical Indian Saint, Agastya, the son of a Hindu Bengali father and a Goanese Christian mother, epitomizes the in-betweenness of the postcolonial subject. His missionary education and Anglicized upbringing have conferred upon him several nicknames like August and English. His existential crisis comes to a head when he finds himself taxed with the task of understanding the system of governance in the far-off district of Madna as a trainee officer. This article seeks to understand Agastya's plight as symptomatic of the problems inherent within the structure of the Indian Administrative Service and the state of India itself. Using the theoretical framework developed by Homi K Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*, I would like to understand Agastya as a postcolonial 'mimic' subject and the system he represents as a 'hybrid' and 'ambivalent' one.



Keywords— Mimicry, hybridity, postcolonial identity, the Indian Administrative Service

The postcolonial subject and the postcolonial welfare nation-state are two complex phenomena that cannot be understood as singular, monolithic identities. This article seeks to understand Upamanyu Chatterjee's representation of both through the lens of "hybridity" and "mimicry" as formulated by Homi K. Bhabha. It provides a reading of Chatterjee's—who himself was an IAS officer—novels *English, August* (1988) and its sequel, *The Mammaries of the Welfare State* (2000) as texts that foreground this mimicry and the complexity of identity in the postcolonial context. Towards the end of the second novel, Chatterjee moves away from mimicry to sheer mockery of the Indian Administrative Services using his confused, unmotivated postcolonial protagonist. The novels thus become a trenchant critique of the welfare state

machinery and also raises questions about the ontological status of the postcolonial subject.

In his book *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi K Bhabha characterizes hybridity as —"A difference "within", a subject that inhabits the rim of an "in-between" reality."(13) We will see how in these two novels the "in-betweenness" of the protagonist as well as that of the system he serves has been deftly portrayed.

One sultry afternoon, on his very first day as a trainee officer in the Collectorate of a fictitious Indian town, Agastya Sen, the protagonist of Upamanyu Chatterjee's novel *English, August*, witnesses a shame-faced Supply Officer being shouted at by the District Collector. An unconnected phrase—"lambent dullness" -- floats into his

mind, and he muses over the scene in the following words—“The Supply Officer wiped his forehead with a many-coloured handkerchief. Yes, lambent dullness, definitely. That he could relate a phrase from an eighteenth-century English poet to this, a sweating Supply Officer in a Collector's office, in Madna, made him smile.” (16)

That the twenty-four-year-old Indian Administrative Service officer could relate a phrase from John Dryden's mock-heroic satire *MacFlecknoe* to a situation he encounters in a non-descript Indian town should not come as a surprise. The historical impetus which gave birth to the Service which Agastya joins in the late twentieth century, had begun in earnest in eighteenth century England. When Dryden was depicting his “empire of dullness”, presided over by his rival poet Thomas Shadwell; a far more efficient system of empire was gradually taking shape in another part of the globe. Both the setting in which Agastya remembers the phrase—a District Collector's Office—and the very act of remembering these particular lines from an English poem (he has read the poem as part of his college curriculum), are legacies of the British Raj to India.

The Honourable Company's Civil Service was regularized as “the covenanted civil service of India” by the Charter Act of 1793. In the second quarter of the nineteenth century, a further distinction was made between the “covenanted” and the “uncovenanted” civil servants, whereby the former were appointed by the Court of Directors of the East India Company and were exclusively British, and the latter were recruited from among both British and “native” candidates. The system of nominating candidates for the ICS by the Court of Directors of the East India Company was replaced by a system of recruitment through competitive examination in 1854. There had been sporadic attempts earlier, at least in theory, to make the “covenanted service” open to Indians as exemplified by the Despatch of 1834 by the Court of Directors which proclaimed that “distinction of race or religion” shall be no bar to for the eligible candidate. But as Deepak Gupta in his study titled *The Steel Frame: A History of the IAS* (2019) succinctly notes “Actually, this clause only pledged that there would be no discriminations on ground of birth, but other tests of qualification provided the barriers to entry of Indians” (20). Even the major impetus behind the more substantial reforms of 1854 came from the needs of the employable educated in Britain, and not the requirements of the colony and the colonial subjects they were to govern. The two fundamental reasons behind the reforms, as outlined by C. J Dewey were--

In 1854 the ancient universities had just entered a period of crisis and reform. One minor aspect of the crisis was the problem of graduate

unemployment...But of far greater moment to academic politicians was the ancient universities' general crisis of identity.... It became necessary, through reform, to satisfy the strong feeling that the universities founded for the whole nation had been diverted to sectional ends. (264)

It was only in 1864 that Satyendranath Tagore, the elder brother of Rabindranath Tagore, became the first Indian ever to successfully compete in the open examination for recruitment into Civil Service. But what clearly emerges from this extremely brief outline of the establishment and the development of the ICS, is that the Indian bureaucracy, from its very inception, has been conceived of as a “ruling caste”, (the term used by Dewey in the title of his essay). To date, the competitive examination held by the Union Public Service Commission is perceived to be the most difficult examination in the country.

After Independence, in 1949 the Indian Civil Service was rechristened as the Indian Administrative Service. The administrative mechanism which was installed by the British primarily to regulate and systematize the collection of revenue from the country, and only secondarily to administer law and justice, was gradually turned into the “Steel Frame” which runs the governmental juggernaut of the world's largest democracy.

Chatterjee's novels *English, August: An Indian Story* and its sequel, *The Mammaries of the Welfare State* revolve around the experiences of Agastya Sen, a young trainee IAS officer. The two novels are as much about Agastya as about the giant administrative structure, the “steel frame” that he is a rather insignificant part of.

The Indian novel in English has been an identifiable phenomenon at least since the 1930s. In its almost century-long existence it has dealt with a wide variety of subjects and has emerged as a globally recognized genre in the 1980s. But one issue that seems to have problematized these novels is the issue of “Indianness”.

As Meenakshi Mukherjee puts it—

But when it comes to English fiction originating in our country, not only does the issue of Indianness becomes a favourite essentialising obsession in academic writings and the book review circuit, the writers themselves do not seem unaffected by it, the complicating factor being that English is not just any language—it was the language of our colonial rulers and continues even now to be the language of power and privilege. (2607)

The question of Indianness--and “authenticity of experience”, when we take into account the writing of the Indian diaspora--is a vexed one. But at the heart of the problem lies an implied value-judgement that privileges

certain types of experiences and writings as “more authentic” or more “quintessentially Indian” than others. In this article, I am going to argue that, Upamanyu Chatterjee treats this issue in his two novels by subverting the idea of a unique/unified/essentially Indian selfhood of which, among other pointers, language is a significant part. In the very first page of *English, August*, the “mongrelness” of the Indian English language is remarked upon

In his seminal essay “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse”, Homi Bhabha characterizes “colonial mimicry” as –

[T]he desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. (86)

If the civilizing mission or the “white man’s burden” are presented as the high-sounding ideals behind the banal and brutal appropriation of power and resources by the colonizer, “mimicry” affects a “comic turn” from these ideals and “emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge” (85).

Chatterjee’s protagonist emerges as a “mimic man” and the structure he reluctantly serves is “mimicry” of a colonial institution. Chatterjee does explore a wide array of problems including, but not limited to, the existential angst of an educated upper-middle class urban youth; the corruption that pervades the Indian administrative and political system; the politics of class and caste; and the problems particular to a developing economy; but instead of dealing with these issues in the manner of a “social realist” novel, he employs narrative and structural strategies that turn the novels into a brilliantly mocking satires on the state of the welfare state.

The title of Chatterjee’s first novel, contrary to expectations, is not a semantic parallel to a phrase like the “Indian Summer”. “English” and “August” are both names given to Agastya by his schoolmates as a reminder of his Anglicized upbringing and supposedly repressed Anglophilia. In a school essay when Agastya claims that his real ambition in life is to become a “domesticated male stray dog”, his friends object to his assertions by claiming that what he really wants to be is an “Anglo-Indian”. Becoming an Anglo-Indian, is of course, biologically impossible for Agastya, but it is interesting to note that his identity is already fractured along ethnic and religious, if not racial lines. The son of a Bengali-Hindu father and a Goanese-Catholic mother, Agastya creates for himself multiple identities with intrepidity. He lies about his age, his educational background, and even his marital status,

alternatively claiming he is married to an English woman or has a Norwegian Muslim wife. He creates several Agastyas for himself and for those around him, inscribing himself within a series of fictions, and getting inscribed in others’ fictions in the process. His father and paternal uncle, representatives of an older generation of the Bengali *bhadrolok* (genteel) class, and more conscious of their cultural roots, resent the implied cultural hybridity that Agastya’s self-projection implies. His uncle scolds him and his friend by pointing out “The greatest praise you mimics long for is to be called European junkies. And who is August? In my presence, call him Ogu” (30). Both the father and the uncle insist on calling him “Ogu”, a more typically Bengali sounding name than either August or English. Agastya’s identity is that a “reformed, recognizable other”, and in the production of this identity there are slippages, excesses and differences.

Name, accent, and appearance --often perceived as some of the most important markers as well as tethers of one’s identity-- ironically becomes the sources of a persistent identity related anxiety for Agastya in Madna. The most frequent question he answers in his early days in the district is about the meaning of his name. This recurrent question is generally followed by the observation that he does not ‘look like’ an IAS, that he does not fit in with his surroundings. Agastya carries this sense of dislocation with him throughout the novel. The structure of the novel is shaped by his disorientation, his existential crisis and his inertia. Bede Scott comments on the “entropic quality” of the novel which is the result of the entropic quality at the heart of the Indian bureaucratic system itself. The procedural delays, the interminable waiting, and the proverbial red-tapism that the system is mired in breeds a kind of boredom that is reflected in both the form and the structure of the novel. Scott points out – “... Agastya is bored, terribly bored, and this affective quality comes to have a profound influence over the narrative he occupies, draining it, too, of its meaning, its energy, and its desire” (497). In another of his fraught exchanges with his uncle, Agastya had been reprimanded for referring to a prolonged period of waiting as waiting for Godot. As with his objection to the Anglicized version of his name, Agastya’s uncle again retorts “... the *first* thing you are reminded of by something that happens around you, is something obscure and foreign, totally unrelated to the life and language around you” (31). For Agastya, a reference to Godot or Dryden is no longer foreign and obscure, it is a part of his identity, an identity which is shaped by his missionary-school education and his degree in English literature, a subject that he is ashamed of having studied in college. This cohabitation of different cultures is one of the sources of his anxiety, but between listening to Keith Jarrett

and Tagore's songs, between reading Marcus Aurelius and the Bhagvad Gita, Agastya testifies to the fact-- and again we go back to Bhabha's comment on Bipin Chandra Pal—that he is a product of “a flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English.” (87).

Unlike Agastya, his immediate boss R. Srivastav, the Collector of Madna, has found a way of resolving this conflict within himself and pronounces with confidence “...You are what you are, just as English here too is what it is, an unavoidable leftover. We can't be ashamed of our past, no, because that is to be ashamed of our present. People curse our history because it is much easier to do that than to work” (61). This comparatively easy resolution eludes Agastya's grasp as he has no inherent faith in the “work” of the welfare state that his superior puts so much faith upon. For him, the entire machinery of the administrative system appears as absurd, and the life he leads in Madna seems irrational. What saves him from becoming complacent and corrupt on the one hand, or misanthropic and corrupt on the other, is this very sense of absurdity. In order to live through a reality that seems impossibly remote, he concocts different versions of himself; is irreverent to the most solemn practices and norms of his service and gives his imagination a free reign. The reference to lambent dullness seems a particularly apt one in this context as in the original context this dullness is the result of an opium-induced stupor. Marijuana and masturbation, intense workout, and the creation of multiple identities—all become the survival strategies in Agastya's arsenal for the twelve months he spends in Madna.

The Mammaries of the Welfare State, published twelve years after its prequel, is more diffused in structure. The single-minded focus on Agastya's existential crisis that had given *English, August* its compactness, is absent from this novel. The setting has changed from Madna to New Delhi, the capital of the Welfare State and the readers are confronted with bigger players in the corridors of power, vis-a vis whom Agastya becomes a lesser actor. This shift in setting and focus is not accidental, and like the previous novel there is a remarkable congruity in theme, structure and characterization. To put the matter simply, if *English, August* was an exploration of ‘mimic man’ trying to find his place within the structure of a postcolonial state, *The Mammaries of the Welfare State*, is an exploration of a ‘mimic’ system, a system which not only registers the difference between mimesis and mimicry, but goes a step ahead into the zone of mockery in the course of this exploration.

As early as 1852, that is even before the ICS was officially open to recruitment through a competitive

examination supplanting the system of patronage and nomination—George Campbell had noted—

It is, indeed, the great principle of all grades of the Indian administration that each official grade is always kept constantly cognizant of all that is done by that below, by means of an infinite variety of statements submitted periodically, showing in every possible form every kind of business and devised to include everything in every shape (254)

The bulwark of the steel frame, from its inception, remains almost the same to date. In what Chatterjee describes as “a Punjabi manner of pronouncing English words”, “memories” becomes “mammaries” (285). The “mammaries” of the modern welfare state of India, thus, contain within itself the indelible “memories” of its colonial past. The structural diffuseness of this novel comes from the fact that it seeks to reproduce the mode of official correspondence within and between the different departments of the government and the functioning of the bureaucratic system itself. The insistence on record-keeping, note-sharing, and filing everything is so ingrained in the system that two officers who share the same desk communicate with each other in the form of official dispatches and memos. With characteristic exaggeration, the omniscient narrator suggests, periodical combustions are arranged in the various governmental departments so that the older and useless files and reports can be destroyed unobtrusively.

Thinly veiled political personages and historical occurrences are woven into the texture of the narrative, a trait that was largely missing in its prequel. However, unlike Salman Rushdie's *The Midnight's Children* (1981) or Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), Chatterjee does not narrate the nation through a mythopoeic framework. His concern is with the here and the now, but the here and now he presents is hyperbolic, irreverent, and almost always exaggerated, but never distorted beyond recognition. Agastya's feeling of unreality and absurdity in Madna was due to the lack of congruence between his lived experiences in the megalopolises of Delhi and Kolkata, and the vast unknown that Madna represents for him. The absurdity in this novel is of a different kind altogether. It is the absurdity of the manufactured reality of the bureaucracy, of the excesses of documentation that drown the facts and produce different versions of truth. Agastya here becomes less of a character and more of a narrative device to hold the disparate parts of the novel together. The focus has shifted from the man to the machine.

One of the first major occurrences of the novel is an outbreak of plague in Madna. When the news reaches the capital of the Welfare State, memos, dispatches, time, and

money are invested not to redress the situation, but to ascertain whether there really is an epidemic in the district. True to the circuitous and tortuous route always adopted by the bureaucratic system, officials from the capital are finally sent to the district almost eleven months after the actual outbreak. Interestingly enough, in the narrative universe of the novel, the actual happenings of national importance, like an epidemic, a political assassination or attempted mob-lynching literally take a backseat in comparison to the centenary celebration of an important politician or the meeting between the Prime Minister's sister-in-law with a political leader in disgrace.

The irreverence that we had noted in the case of *English, August* is magnified to a massive scale in this novel. In its constant references to eating, defecating and having or thinking about sex, it reaches a quasi-Rabelaisian dimension. There is also a marked proclivity for creating ludicrous acronyms, so that a welfare programme is called BOOBZ i.e., Budget Organization on Base Zero; the Ministry for Heritage, Upbringing and Resource Investment becomes HUBRIS. The concluding section of the novel, titled "Wake Up Call", takes the mockery to an unprecedented level. Agastya, along with his friend Dhrubo, a fellow IAS officer, draw up a proposal for a programme titled "Operation Bestial", which is an acronym for "Better Sex for Turning Into Life" (417). Operation Bestial is a proposed scheme for the Welfare State to invest in making pornographic movies "as part of a larger education policy". Like Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal", the narrative here reaches the state of total irony. In all non-seriousness, the proposal states that the programme, if implemented, will not only solve major public health issues but also generate a massive profit for the welfare state, as the Ministry of Culture may sell tickets for the movies in open as well as in the black market.

The mimicry in this narrative is multi-layered, and the epithet, at this stage, can no longer be restricted to Bhabha's explanation of the term. Not only is the present system of administrative governance in India a mimic and hybrid one; the narrative parodies the *modus operandi* of the Indian bureaucracy through its very form and adds a further level of mimicry. Thus, the novel becomes a mimicry of a mimicry, keeping the readers always alive to the inherent absurdity and the insidious ways of the system. The real moments of high seriousness come sporadically in the novel, in a blink-and-you-miss manner, but those are moments worth paying special attention to. One such moment is when Agastya is sent for a training programme in Paris, understands the problems of communication from a global perspective and its direct connection with the history of imperialism—

Agastya had sensed, or recognized anew, the obvious fact of the variety of our planet, of the millions on it from whom English was as remote as Spanish, French, and Portuguese were from him. They embarrassed and saddened him – his narrow Anglocentricity and the insidiousness of all colonialism, by which succeeding generations of the once-colonized too were obliged to think and to communicate in perpetually- alien tongues. (404)

These moments of self and systemic realization are all the more valuable as they are hedged around with the characteristic comic verve that the narrator employs.

Unlike his more public-minded father who had also been an IAS Officer and ended his career as the Governor of Bengal, Agastya Sen is a reluctant administrator, a postcolonial subject who is always confused about his selfhood and identity and ends up manufacturing various identities. He looks at the system he serves with detachment and sees through the skeleton of the steel frame. The final offer that he makes to the welfare state in the proposal for Project Bestial is to let him and his friend "further probe [the] links between power, documentation and desire" (423)—three qualities that marked the entire project of imperialism and unfortunately, still marks the political and administrative system of the neocolonial state.

Thus, the two novels by Upamanyu Chatterjee with Agastya Sen as their protagonist foreground the colonial mimicry and hybridity of existence that is the destiny of the postcolonial subject, but which is also a source of angst related to that very identity. It also offers an incisive critique of the welfare state with comic verve and irreverence.

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