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Black Humour and Ennui in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August: An Indian Story*

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Abstract :

Upamanyu Chatterjee is gifted with an extraordinary talent for irony, satire and black humour. His young, modern urban educated characters express the sense of 'ennui' as they are restless, disinterested, enervating, feel alienated and face the inner conflict and arduously try to find their place in the world. This paper makes an attempt to analyse how Upamanyu Chatterjee exploits the literary form 'Black humour' that springs from the 'ennui' of the protagonist and other young characters in his maiden novel *English, August : An Indian Story*. In this well received and widely acclaimed novel, Chatterjee also explores the affectation and pomposity in the world of Indian bureaucracy with many a 'tongue in cheek' expression.

Keywords : Agastya, Chatterjee, black comedy, black humour, ennui, Madna, weird,

Introduction:

The faculty of laughing is a unique gift to human beings which is deprived to millions of other flora and fauna. Human laughter arises from many factors of life; it is generated not only from the funny activities, oddities, shortcomings and behavioural dysfunctions of the people but also frequently from desperation, violence and suffering. The literature of any nation or language is not complete without the genre of 'comedy'. Creative writing has a special place for such comedy that is evolved into many sub-genres like Satire, Irony and Farce. These literary forms have well been exploited by many novelists, to expound the lighter side of the cynical and ugly things in our life. The novelists employ the element of comedy as an attack on the shortfalls of the people, society and human errors. But the other kind of the comedy that sometimes looks bizarre, freakish and shocking is called 'Black humour' or 'Black comedy'. The term 'Black comedy' is also synonymously used with 'Dark comedy' or 'Gallows comedy' if the subject of humour is very unpleasant, serious and painful. After 1960s, the expression of Black comedy or Black humour came into existence which regards human suffering as absurd rather than pitiable or that considers human existence as ironic and pointless but somehow comic. According to The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 'It(Black humour) is a literary form that combines the morbid and grotesque with humour and farce to give a disturbing effect and convey the absurdity and cruelty of life'. Encyclopedia defines the black humour as, 'writing that juxtaposes morbid or ghastly elements with comical ones that underscore the senselessness or futility of life. Black humour often uses farce and low comedy to make clear that individuals are helpless victims of fate and character'.

The French surrealist Andre Breton edited the excerpts of forty five authors, each introduced by a commentary by Breton himself and in 1949. It was published in French as 'Anthologie de l'humour noir' ('Anthology of Black Humour'). But it was banned by the French Government during the World War II. The book was again published with the title 'The definitive' in 1966. The anthology gave the new meaning to the term "Black humour" that we attribute now. Breton said that until then the term had meant nothing, unless someone imagined jokes about black people. Later the new connotation was applied to the novels of Nathaneal West, Vladimir Nabokov and Joseph Heller. Black comedy was also well exploited in the 'Theatre of the Absurd' by Beckett, Pinter, Albee and Ionesco. Wikipedia states that 'the purpose of black comedy is to make light of serious and often taboo subject matter, and some comedians use it as a tool for exploring vulgar issues, thus provoking discomfort and serious thoughts as well as amusement in their audience. Popular themes of the genre include murder, suicide, depression, abuse, mutation, war, barbarism, drug abuse, terminal illness, domestic violence, sexual violence, insanity, nightmare, racism, homophobia, sexism, disability both physical and mental, chauvinism, corruption and crime. Even though Black comedy is about gloomy and disturbing elements, it is not straight forward obscenity. It is not to offend people but includes more of irony and fatalism'.

In the context of globalization, the world has become smaller in all terms but still, the educated urban youth are restless, aimless and feel bored of their work and feel alien to the world. Even after receiving convent education, acquired degrees and positioned highly in government and corporate sectors, somehow the present urban youth are listless and sick of life. They are disinterested in everything, experience 'ennui' in their work and sometimes even in their very existence. Their higher learning and capabilities don't guard them from their sense of dislocation and tedium. 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'. The origin of the word is from old French 'enui' that means annoyance and from Latin 'inodiare' means to make loathsome. This paper is an attempt to discuss how the Post Modern Indian novelist, Upamanyu Chatterjee in his maiden novel 'English, August : An Indian Story' exploited the literary form 'Black humour' to make the protagonist 'Agastya' and other youngsters express their sense of ennui and reflect in wry humour about the cynical, ugly, bewildering situations they come across. The author uses techniques like fragmented narration and different points of view and depicts weird and bizarre situations thus enabling the readers encounter frequent 'tongue in cheek' expressions which are amusing and at the same time appalling.

Upamanyu Chatterjee who is also an IAS officer published his first novel 'English, August : An Indian Story' in 1988 which was later made into a successful English feature film. So far he has produced five major novels. He received 'Sahitya Akademy Award' in 2004 for his third novel 'The Mammaries of the Welfare State' written as sequel to his first work 'English, August: An Indian Story'. The protagonist 'Agastya Sen' in this novel is a city born and highly educated, Anglophile and likes to be called 'August' or 'English'. But he is fondly called 'Ogu' by his father and uncle. He lost his mother at an early age who is a Goanese catholic and his father was a retired IAS and now the Governor of Bengal. After having become an IAS, Agastya is posted as a trainee to the district town of Madna, an ugly, hot, small hinterland town somewhere in the South India. He is unable to adjust at Madna, uninterested in the job and

reflects in an ironic way, comments silently at every situation in a tone of black humour that originates mostly from his sense of ennui. The novel is all about the protagonist's experiences and reflections as a Trainee Civil Servant at a small town, where he feels dislocated, lives without any ambition or conviction, preoccupied by marijuana, alcohol and sexual fantasies. After some encounters with senior officers, observing the dire living conditions of the tribal habitants, visiting a leper rehabilitation center, he realizes his responsibilities and is finally posted as Assistant Collector at Koltanga, another small town in the district. Chatterjee makes it a lively satiric novel that mirrors the reflections of the modern urban educated youth and the lighter side of the affectation and pompous lifestyle of the bureaucrats.

Dr. Mukul Dikshit opines that Chatterjee has, for the first time, focused on a new class of Westernized Urban Indians that was hitherto ignored in the regional as well as the English Fiction of India". He declares that Chatterjee's 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. (Wikipedia)

Before he leaves for Madna, Agastya talks to his friend Dhruvo when both were 'stoned due to marijuana'. Dhruvo says "August, you are going to get hazar fucked in Madna" (p.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" (p.3). At the very outset, the conversation between two close friends, the irreverent expressions shock the conservative readers as Agastya expresses his disinterestedness towards his job which is rooted in his mind well in advance, even before he joins it. The lack of seriousness towards a career mirrors the tendency of the modern youth about the very occupation they need to live on. At Madna, he is accommodated in a Government rest house, given the attendant Digambar and the cook Vasanth, who serves him insipid food. On the very first day Agastya remarks "Dinner was unbelievable, the dal tasted like lukewarm chilled shampoo" (6). Later he says '...because at the Rest House I seem to be eating Vasant's turds'(49). Chatterjee is unnerved to bring out a bizarre and unusual comparison of food and faeces unveiling the element of black humour and prepares the readers for such weird expressions as the novel progresses. On his first morning at 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 takes up the ordinary characters or situations and exaggerates them far beyond the limits of normal satire or irony. Even the great icons 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 perplexed. Agastya observes the Gandhi hall beside the Police station of Madna and is bewildered at its dilapidated 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 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”(21). At the interview for the posts of teachers, The Education Officer and the DDO Mr. Bajaj, ask the candidates some question. Agastya joins them and hears 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 generates humour from the sheer negligence of the people responsible for the erection and poor maintenance of the statue and from the utter ignorance of the prospect teachers that amuse the readers. At the same time the readers would be taken aback at the bold narration of the marred-picture of the Father of the Nation.

The protagonist helplessly laughs at his own suffering, tedium, 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” (p.48). His sense of alienation and listlessness make him find some solace by indulging in secret pleasures of doping, masturbating and boozing. He meets the District Collector Srivastav in high i.e. still stoned at his office and finds him unnecessarily pompous and his own job cynical and not interesting. He gives funny personal details and lies to his subordinates that he is twenty eight and married (of course he wanted to say ‘twice’) , though he is then just twenty four and still a bachelor. In our country, India, marriage is mostly honoured, giving highest priority in one’s life that stabilizes and elevates the social status of the couple. Contrastingly the modern youth do not believe in this good old custom and Agastya’s concocted version of wife and marital status reveals the reverence getting diminished in the institution of marriage.

“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 cooks up stories instantaneously. “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”(p.13-14). In the presence 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 the other 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 recollects 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 some 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 obsessed with lies, but his desperation and sense of dislocation make him fabricate the things unnerved by the consequences. When he is caught in a helpless situation, to beat his tedium, he just cooks up anything to come out of those circumstances, an escapade that is prevalent among the modern youth.

Shankar, the Deputy Engineer in Minor Irrigation department who shares the rest house, makes fun of his name and prattles while boozing. “Agastya, a good name quiet rare, means born of a jar. The jar is the womb and thereby the mother goddess, but the jar could just as easily have contained Vedic whisky. Soma-type, good quality Scotch, bottled for twelve years” (28). Even when the District Collector asks the meaning of his name, Agastya himself was tempted to give an irreverent and weird meaning, “Agastya in Sanskrit, he wanted to say, for one who shits only one turd every morning”(15). On other occasion he wanted to tell Mrs. Srivastav that “ Agastya, half-ready to answer the next question with, ‘it’s Sanskrit for one who turns the flush just before he stars pissing, and then tries to finish passing before the water disappears” (54). Chatterjee attempts to subvert the age old mythical references of the protagonist’s name and thus creates black humour.

Another unique feature of Chatterjee’s dark humour is, he takes up the scatological terms i.e. bodily fluids that are embarrassing to discuss openly but Chatterjee boldly makes light of such ugly and often taboo subject matters, and explores vulgar issues that produce wry sense of humour. After passing his first day at Madna, ‘he (Agastya) felt unhinged....he lay down and looked at the wooden ceiling. He could masturbate, but without enjoyment...the job 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 own shit doesn’t smell like that”(27). Chatterjee frequently brings crap and turds into his narration to expound our ugly rural habits in a lighter vein. Chatterjee’s condemnation of untidiness and open defecation draw the attention of the readers towards the unhygienic practices of many rural habitants of India. He indirectly points out about the necessity and urgency among the Indian rural masses to inculcate some clean habits of healthy living.

He writes “On the road, he (Agastya) watched the road to avoid the holes and the varieties of excrement”. Next, when a buffalo whisks its tail and deposits some dung on his arm, he reflects. “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 even included getting shit off his arms”(41). The incident focuses on the existential dilemma and his sense of dislocation for having been posted at Madna, the small dirty, dusty town. The buffalo’s dung on his arm enhances his growing cynicism and increases his existential dilemma at Madna. When the protagonist tries to evade an official meeting, he wants to take the help of Dr. Multani to certify his illness and treat him. He says “And to Multani, of course, he’d say that his stomach was upset. But what if Multani asked him for a shit sample? That could be awkward, particularly since he’d been shitting so well of late. Or he could steal someone else’s shit, Vansant’s perhaps, in whose case all he had to do was, steal into kitchen and delve into a vat. That would be quite a scoop for the Dainik: IAS officer caught stealing cook’s condiments” (p.220). The illustration takes the readers to the heights of the dark comedy, mastered by Upamanyu Chatterjee. The lack of strong will and ambition towards work, the shift from city to rural setting makes the protagonist reflect in a weird way. The author does not even exempt children uttering the taboos that rise black humour. Srivastav’s son of four years shows his penis to the visitors and explains that ‘piddle comes from it’. (56) And on the road side a group of shitting children get up to thump the passing car (124). Srivastav’s children cry ‘Piss for bungaali uncle’ when their mother says ‘fish for the Bengali’(107). The six year old daughter also passes a weird comment when Kumar serves himself a second bowl of desert at a lunch, “Kumar uncle will explode, then we

can have him for dinner”(108). The author takes advantage of ugly, detestable objects as elements to generate black humour and boldly gives a vivid description of the unpleasant taboo scenes like urinating, excreta to bring out such bizarre effect for his purpose.

Another interesting childhood incident of abnormal fantasy highlights the black 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 be a domesticated male stray dog because they lived the best life.....barked unexpectedly.....and got a lot of sex.” (35). Agastya recollects how he and his school friends had an adolescent fantasy about Dhrubo’s mother. Later at Madna, he asks his cook to bring milk at which he responds, “Milk? Asked Vasant, as though Agastya asked for his wife’s cunt” (26). He is surprised at his hectic social life and finds it lethal with his seniors like Srivastav and Menon. He felt almost like ‘a wrong man in workers’ paradise’ and wanted to tell his father “See, what the job that you said was so fulfilling is doing to me”, He observed that the elderly Menon looks freshened and Agastya unfitting in his company and reflects “beside his pinkness he felt secretly unclean as though he hadn’t changed underwear he had climaxed in” (51). Such a taboo is openly described by Chatterjee, a true Post Modern novelist. These bizarre descriptions may not look obscene but certainly make its readers puzzled but enable them to understand how modern youth lack seriousness in life and look at everything in a lighter and cynical way.

Agastya ‘s concern about his health is paradoxical as he does exercise daily, goes for long walks and gets his drinking water boiled regularly like a foreign tourist. At the same time, he takes a dope of marijuana and suffers from insomnia. It all represents the general sick feeling, disinterestedness, and growing sense of listlessness among the educated urban youth when they are displaced to take up some challenges. Then these youth are easily drawn towards soft drugs, feel ennui and lose taste and seriousness in life. Peter Brooker observes “....Post Modernism presented an argument for sensuous response and the languages 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 erotics in a deliberate affront to the decorum’s and hierarchies of literary establishment” (Brooker:2).

In his room, he feels insomnia, and apart from his secret pleasures, reads the Bhagavdgita, listens to Tagore and reads the classic The Meditations by Marcus Aurelius, the second century Roman emperor and great philosopher. He is usually disinterested in the official meetings and is mostly amused by the oddities of the subordinates, affectation and unnecessary officialdom of the bureaucrats. When S.P Kumar introduced Sathe, a cartoonist cum journalist and talks about a murder, where a child’s face was bashed with a wall clock, instead of pitying the child the protagonist reflects in a kinky way, “Agastya felt a little sick, as though someone had lightly snicked his testicles. They could visit him too, one kick in the balls, they could crush his face with his cassette recorder before they took it away.” (p.43). The unpleasant scenes of suffering, murder are all subject for dark humour to the protagonist who feels ennui without a strong will for a productive work in spite of his position.

Chatterjee never uses black humour to offend or humiliate others but it seems to be a way out for his characters bitten by general tedium. The protagonist, throughout the novel feels alienated not only from Madna but also from the universe itself. Chatterjee draws a noticeable contrast

between the young and old matured characters in the novel. Regarding his office, Agastya thought that “at least six hours of shifting one’s buttocks on wood and clandestinely flicking one’s sweat on to other people out of boredom and incomprehensible”(40) But his father enjoys high regard among the bureaucrats and has been working as the Governor of Bengal. “Life for him was a serious, rather noble business, a blend of Marcus Aurelius and the Readers’ Digest” (40). In a letter to Agastya his father advised him not to choose the soft option just because it is soft option, one can’t fulfill oneself by doing so (149). Agastya also finds a vast contrast between the western and Indian ideology about looking young and physically fit. Neera, his girl friend from Calcutta often says that “the West worship youth”, whereas in India we worship age. He also questions if it was wrong to do exercise and look fit and young. He observes that there is no single person in Government who looks in shape. So Chatterjee shows a huge gap between Eastern and Western philosophy regarding age. It also reveals the cultural clash and westernization of Indian urban youth and disintegration of the old values. This infatuation of westernization or say Americanization is highlighted when Agastya’s college mate Mahendra Bhatia, calls himself Mandy and was ambitious to go to USA, wears Calvin Klein jeans, two headphones with a Walkman, calling rupees bucks. One of the friends says about Mandy, “He’s the sort who’d love to get AIDS just because it’s raging in America” (76). Ironically the same Mandy has become a forest officer and been posted to Madna, earlier than Agastya. While Agastya and his college mates express their boredom, the senior bureaucrats are busy in keeping their profiles high and enjoy the facilities and authority fetched by their position. His college mate Dhruvo who is now an officer in City Bank is not contented with his job but plans to appear for the Civil Services. Contrastingly, Agastya who is already in the ‘steel frame’ (IASs) of the state, wants to come out of the bureaucracy and join as an editor or as a journalist in a publishing house in Delhi where his cousin ‘Tonic’ works. All the city educated youth in the novel are somehow caught in the web of existential dilemma. They are in a fix, indecisive of a career, unable to love and progress in the career in spite of their intelligence and capabilities that reminds us ‘To be or not to be’ situation.

Renu, the Punjabi girl friend of Dhruvo writes from Illinois that she has no meaning to come over to America for her studies. She expresses her sense of displacement and feels low all the time. She says, “ I really wonder what I ‘m doing here , especially because academically this place really sucks..... The worst is not having any one to share the absurdity....why don’t we learn that all changes of place are for the worse...(p.156). Renu seems to lack ambition even after having admitted in a foreign University. It is not just dislike for a place and studies but the modern youth’s doldrums about life. When an American asks her if she rode on an elephant to college in Bombay, she replies, “Yes, I said, but I had to hire one, since we were too poor to own our own”(p.156). Instead of mingling and making friends, she expresses her futility and concludes that “ to appear quiet and disinterested is the greatest defence, to convince oneself that nothing matters...The only way to cope with things is to pretend that nothing matters”. (156,157) She wears a look of ‘stay away from me’ expression and shares the same feelings of her lover Dhruvo regarding one’s work and life. Agastya goes to Delhi for Puja holidays and along with Dhruvo meets old friend Madan who used to wear faded jeans in college. Now he is changed, recently joined with Chartered Accountants. His job forced him to look different. Ironically he is disgusted to be clean and 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 goneEvery day in the office I feel as though my head is being raped Do you two ever feel like that?” (p.173)

Contrastingly, Madan's sister, an intelligent girl bags Rhode's scholarship and plans to go to Oxford. He is deeply ashamed of her, envies her for being clever and jealous of her keen interest and excellent performance in academics. Madan is the true embodiment of ennui, unable to enjoy his own work that earns his bread and butter and mark a respectable position in the society. In his talk with Mandy, Agastya says that "But, Mandy, all jobs are boring, and life for everyone is generally unhappy. You can't blame Madna" (77). In general, almost all the young characters in the novel share the same views of life, feel it troublesome, much agonized by listlessness and believe that it's absurd and futile to work or live. When Mrs. Vatsala Rajan, wife of Collector of Paal, talks eloquently about the need for the exposure of Indian traditions, Agastya loses interest and dreams that the other listeners, Mr. John Avery, the British and his Indian wife Sita would die for reasons unknown and later after thirty years, their son John Jr. would get the post-mortem report of his parents that would read 'Death by Boredom'. Chatterjee's fresh and uncomparable imaginative skill makes him a unique humourist of black comedy.

Chatterjee traces out some kinky and weird elements to produce black humour. The words 'blood', 'suicide', 'murder' make their frequent sweep in the narration. When the officers of Madna go for a picnic, all men start cutting onions. Agastya takes a knife and cuts his finger unknowingly. "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" (131). It seems Agastya is weird to mock at his own blood as pale coloured, lifeless that it was betraying him. He also feels that 'world is not worth living'. "But the world isn't a wonderful place of exciting opportunities. It's generally dull and fucked everywhere. You just have to settle down, unless you want to commit suicide (77). He goes on prattling on how one can go for a suicide. One weird idea is get your sex changed, marry a man, kill him first and burn yourself on his pyre to re-establish the old social evil of 'Sati', the self-immolation at the death of husband. Chatterjee doesn't spare the idea of satirizing even religion to produce his unique kind of dark humour. Govind Sathe, the cartoonist reflects, "I really feel religion only begins to make sense when our cocks have ceased to stand" (118). Agastya is not positive about marriage and tells that he would marry perhaps not out of passion, but out of convention, which was a safer thing.(167). Marriage to him is almost like a death in a road accident, it was something that happened to other people. He is unconvinced to marry and share his room with a strange girl, get stoned before her and read Marcus. It's his inner conflict; complexity to express his pain for being alone and at the same time wants to enjoy it without sharing. The same complexity and his ennui make him resort to not only to soft drugs, but towards developing a sense of ironic vision at every one and at every situation and thus reflect in dark humour. As the elements of dark humour range from self-pity to murder or suicide, the wide range of these weird thoughts leads to fragmented narration, drawing unusual comparisons, and vaguely connected series of events in the novel. However Chatterjee innovatively uses the feeling of ennui, introducing a new element to generate black humour.

Agastya as part of his training visits places and meets all kinds of district officers like BDO, DDO, S.P, Forest officer, Judge and so on. All his apprenticeship is done with much detachment, paying no interest and no attention in official meetings. He hears half from others and slips into his own day dreams, makes distorted versions of the conversation. Once he goes to Collectors bungalow and Shipra, the six year old daughter of Srivasthav shouts out that 'Bungalali uncle has come' and other kids also repeat the same. But Agastya hears that they are shouting 'Pumbali Kunkle has Bum'(p.182). In a conversation he confesses that how in seconds his mind moved

from the somber to frivolous. Once he stole the car keys of the Collector in the bungalow and funnily visualizes how the Collector would react and shout at the driver. Finally he laughed at the meanness of his action. It is not actually a thief's activity but marks his desperate fight against listlessness, dislocation and futility of his mere existence.

Agastya visits tribal villages of Jompanna, Chipanti and wondered at the humble living conditions of the people in the forest. He was moved by the plight of them due to acute water scarcity. His sense of ennui slowly starts dripping away when he jumps into action to provide water to them. He is able to get the compliance of his subordinates in ensuring the supply of drinking water to the villagers. Murari Prasad aptly points: "Agastya appears to be close to changing his mindset after a visit to Chipanti.....moved by the plight of the hapless women..... for a while he is recklessly honest"(43). Chatterjee makes his hero understand the need of the hour, work culture and plunge into action, discharging the assigned duty and in turn serve the community. In an interview with Prathima, Chatterjee himself says, "The whole water issue is his (Agastya's) first outward movement. But not in a dramatic way; it is just the hint of looking outward. Even though he is longing to be self-absorbed, events in themselves can pull a person out." (Prathima 60).

Agastya says to his uncle about his attitude once "Of course nothing is fixed. I'm in a sort of state of flux, restless. I don't want challenges or responsibility or anything.....I just want this moment, this sunlight, the car in the garage, that music system in my rooms, these gross material things, I could make them last forever...This narrow placid world, here and now is enough, where success means watching the rajnigandhas you planted blossom. I am not ambitious for ecstasy, you will ask me to think of future but the decade to come pales before the second, the span of my life is less important than its quality. I want to sit here in the mild Sun and try and not to think, try and escape the inequity of the restlessness of my mind.... Doesn't anyone understand the absence of ambition or the simplicity of it" (148). The novelist presents his protagonist as simple, fatalistic and without ambition in life. At the end of the novel Chatterjee lessens the intensity of the black humour and paves the way for the progress of the events. Agastya is posted to Koltanga, another small town as Assistant Collector, he boards the train and reads Marcus Aurelius "Today I have got myself out of all my perplexities; or rather, I have got the perplexities out of myself-for they were not without, but within; they lay in my own outlook"(288). Agastya fights his sense of futility, ennui at Madna and at the end moves on to his new place of posting. Thus the bureaucrat-novelist Chatterjee fills his maiden novel with the elements of Black humour touching upon the themes like food, lies, marriage, subversion, scatology, cultural clash, general feeling of ennui and listlessness making it a unique entertainer.

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