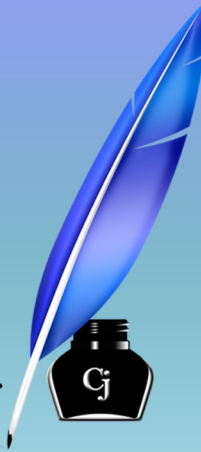


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Reconstructing Gender in *The Mammaries of the Welfare State*

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Upamanyu Chatterjee shot into fame immediately as a novelist with the publication of *English, August* (1988) and *The Last Burden* (1993). In this sequel to his debut novel, Agastya sen – grown older, funnier, exhausted, almost endearing is back with some of his friends. “Comic and Kafkaesque, *The Mammaries of Welfare State* is a masterwork of satire by a major writer at the height of his powers”¹. It is the cover photograph by Ashish Chawla that is fascinating and intriguing but also leads one to interrogate the propriety of it. The picture itself is satirical deliberately shot to match the content of the novel. “Satire can be described as the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn or indignation. It differs from the comic in that comedy evokes laughter mainly as an end in itself, while satire derides; that is, it uses laughter as a weapon, and against a butt that exists outside the work itself. The butt may be an individual, or a type of a person, a class, an institution, a nation, or even against mankind”².

The wide range of problems faced by a bureaucrat, a civil servant like housing problem when he is transferred to a metropolitan city, the magic of the Aflatoons, the Prime Minister’s visits, corruption, sexual harassment and many more issues are deftly handled by the author. I am interested in focusing on the operation of sexism at workplace and how is it that a male author like Upamanyu Chatterjee has portrayed it in this novel. This problem is dealt in the second section of the novel.

The first section of the novel focuses on the inherent problem of loneliness in the life of a bureaucrat. Agastya, the protagonist of the novel “was so enervated by his life in the city that ever so often, when he was alone, he found himself leaning back in his desk chair or resting his head against the armrest of the lumpy sofa in his office that served as his bed, shutting his eyes and weeping silently. The cry generally made him feel better. His office was his home, so hard-working a civil servant was he” (p.1). The opening of the novel reminds the reader of Herman Melville’s fascinating character Bartleby, the scrivener whose story is narrated by the employer. It is loneliness, the private anguish of his characters related to environment and the dramatization of personal psychology in the context of social change that is significant in Arthur Miller’s plays too. Agastya Sen encounters a similar predicament in this novel but the only difference is he has to suffer frequent transfers to strange, unknown cities being a bureaucrat: “Then out of the blue - personnel always moved like lightning when it wanted to fuck somebody’s happiness – he’d received his transfer orders to this fifteen-by-fifteen boarded-up section of veranda of the fourteenth floor of the New Secretariat in the western province’s capital city.” (p.2)

The author frequently provides glimpses of the sordid dirt and ugliness prevailing in the city, around his office thus: “The windows of his section of Veranda offered a breath-taking view of the world’s largest slum undulating for miles down to the grey fuzziness of the Arabian Sea” (p.4). The novelist displays his ability to use language to create beauty as well as ugliness and to include moments of irony in-between. There are times when narrative voice is overly intrusive and the lexis of psychotherapy sits awkwardly on the page.

The second section of the novel – “Conduct Unbecoming of a Civil Servant” exposes the sexual harassment meted out to civil servants by the higher officials in a women-devaluing society. The plight of Miss Lina Natesan Thomas, Junior administrator (Under Training) in the Ministry Heritage, Upbringing and Resource Investment and eventually Agastya’s subordinate-to-be is disgusting. Her work is not taken seriously by the male officers. She is looked down with contempt and the feeling of isolation haunts her. She is seen as the “other”. “In patriarchal, Eurocentric, phallogocentric culture the feminine and the post-colonial both exist in this dark chthonic region of otherness and non-being.” (W.D. Ashcroft, 23). Thus Indian Women like Miss Lina negotiate survival through an array of oppressive patriarchal family structures: age, marital status, single status, caste, community, etc. The heterogeneity of Indian experience reveals that there are multiple patriarchies at home, office, sports, institutions, etc. “The problem for essentialist feminisms is that by asserting on one hand that the otherness of woman is a construction of patriarchy and yet that is out of this otherness that a female language must be constructed or recovered.” (W.D. Ashcroft, 26)

Miss Lina submits a thirty- page memorandum on the subject of the plague to the Head of her Department, the plague was altogether a graver subject but ironically she ends up writing a confidential letter by Registered Post to the Secretary of the Welfare State on the general administrative difficulties faced in the functioning of the Department. The content of the letter exposes the sexual trauma that a lady subordinate officer has to confront- “It will not be out of place to mention here that when I first arrived in this Department, in lieu of my own desk and office room, I was offered a seat on a cane sofa in the chambers of the then Deputy Secretary, Shri O.P. Chadha. I had at that time complained in writing that it was neither possible nor proper for a Junior Administrator (Under Training), a lady officer, to function out of the chambers of the Deputy Secretary, a satyr. My complaint, which can be perused at Annexure L, had inter alia noted that Shri Chadha had verbally proposed to me at that time that if I did not care for the cane sofa, I could work sitting on his lap” (p. 49). This need to write out of a sense of sexual harassment is equivalent to the exhortations of *écriture feminine* to write the body. Helen Cixous says:

Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement (Cixous 1975, p. 245).

The consequence of this complaint earns her the criticism that “Her conduct is unbecoming of a civil servant” and devious efforts are made to have her transferred to Madna on plague duty. It is the sexual politics that is detestable and nauseating in the novel. Sexual colonialism refers to the relationship between the sexes which is a relationship of dominance and subservience. It refers to the relationship between sex and power and as Kate Millet puts it “Through this system a most ingenious form of ‘interior colonization’ has been achieved”. Men are the colonizers, the women colonized and as Simone de Beauvoir perceives it, the position that women occupy in the society is “comparable in many respects to that of racial minorities in spite of the fact that women constitute numerically at least half of the human race” (Parshley 9).

The sexual exploitation of women has been dealt by many other male Indian English novelists, like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Amitav Ghosh, Rushdie, Rohinton

Mistry and many others. The subordinate social position of a woman in patriarchal society and sexual exploitation is very well depicted in Anand's *Untouchable*, Rushdie's *Shame*, Narayan's *The Dark Room*, Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers*, etc. Women in the fiction written by Indian male writers have also been portrayed as protagonists and even as central voices. The male and female dichotomy of polar opposites with the former oppressing the latter at all times is a universal phenomenon. An awareness of women's oppression and exploitation in society, at the bureaucratic level has been very sincerely described by the author Upamanyu Chatterjee in *The Mammaries of Welfare State*. Acknowledging sexism in daily life and attempting to challenge and eliminate it through deconstructing mutually exclusive notions of femininity and masculinity as biologically determined categories that opens the way towards an equitable society for both men and women is what is hinted at in the novel.

The fifth section of the book – “The Prime Minister visits” exposes the acute problem of poverty faced by our people in the country – “In contrast, in the district of Madna, Agastya himself had found concrete evidence of at least eighteen cases in which poverty had forced families in the block of Jompanna to sell themselves, literally body and soul, as bonded labourers for seventy-five rupees per year, that is, for the price of three litres of petrol for a car idling in a traffic jam, per year, year after year” (p. 167). Madna becomes an archetypal place in the novel, a place which, despite its insignificance and general ghastliness, is central to the story. “Madna is representative of ten thousand other small towns and five hundred other districts in a land of billion people. The events that occur and the characters who exist there could quite easily be located in any of the other dots on the landscape. Indeed, it would be more useful to say that many of the incidents – the outcry over the plague, the disappearance of chamundi, the attack on Suroor, the ping-ponging of Agastya Sen – take place in Madna principally because they have Madna – like qualities” (p. 196). The picture of desolation that Upamanyu has created certainly serves as a contrast between the rural poverty and the urban luxury and waste. The moral underpinning of each character's response is invariably comprehended. His prose is powerfully imaginative, unflinchingly honest, alive with comic ironies.

The last section of the book – “Wake-up call” traces the roots of the problems of the Indian's filthy behavior to sexual dissatisfaction, unhealthy curiosity about sex and therefore, nothing should be left to his or her imagination. “On a war-footing, therefore, the Welfare State must encourage our entrepreneurs to make some first-class hard pornographic films. Nobody who is truly honest with himself will balk at going ahead full steam with this programme, which I have tentatively entitled Operation Bestial, that is, Better Sex for Tuning into Life”. Hence Bestial thinks the author should be seen as part of a larger education policy. “It is neither a joke nor a secret that our people need to be told what goes in where. The films will show in close-ups clear enough to satisfy the most myopic, the dumbest and the most aroused- and explain the acts and processes that are in fact so profoundly moving, so beautiful and fulfilling, but in our country and in the psyche of our countrymen, have been warped and polluted, made obscene, the inspiration for sniggers and lewd, bestial thinking” (p. 47). The power of linguistic invention keeps the novelist buoyant over and over again. He exposes and entertains through satire and unexpected twists, turning both language and maxims on their heads. It is highly original novel which is scatological with heaps of attitude, panache and intellectual daring. He suggests that the only way out of the cul-de-sac of pragmatic politics faced by a bureaucrat especially women may be the politics of the imagination. The most powerful preoccupations in the novel being the desolation of bureaucratic life – all details of character, incident and setting serve this theme.

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