

Agastya versus August: A Postcolonial War of Cultural Piracy

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ABSTRACT

The theme of exile runs through most of the modern literature. This sense of exile is, in fact, a by-product of cultural amalgamation. Reasons may be many. But this issue assumes an immediacy of concern with all post-colonial literature as they are an outcome of an unequal dialectic between a violent and rapacious imperialistic culture and a subjugated though often rich and complex native culture. Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English August: An Indian Story* raises the issue of identity and cultural piracy in a post-colonial society and problematizes the issue by implicating the subject in a web of contradictory and opposing material and discursive practices. The focus of the novelist and my research paper is to show the mental conflict and plight of the urban Indians like August who are victims of an alien cultural discourse which has been internalized by them in the course of their educational cultural nurturing. They are culturally pirated folks.

KEYWORDS

Violent; Imperialistic; Cultural Discourse

Introduction:

The theme of exile runs through most of the modern literature. This sense of exile is, in fact, a by-product of cultural amalgamation. Reasons may be many. But this issue assumes an immediacy of concern with all post-colonial literature. In fact, they are an outcome of an unequal dialectic between a violent and rapacious imperialistic culture and a subjugated though often rich and complex native culture. This dialectic has caused in the colonized societies large scale displacements, dispossessions and dislocations – social, cultural, linguistic and geographical – thus resulting in a crisis of identity and creating a sense of alienation. Under all these circumstances the modern man has become a cultural allotrope.

Discussion:

The crisis of identity, as Bill Ashcroft et. al. suggest, is caused by “cultural denigration, the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior social or cultural model”.¹

Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English August: An Indian Story* raises the issue of identity in a post-colonial society and problematizes the issue by implicating the subject in a web of contradictory and opposing material and discursive practices. The focus of the novelist is to show the mental plight of the urban Indians like August who are victims of an alien cultural discourse which has been internalized by them in the course of their educational cultural nurturing. The protagonist roams around aimlessly and which is “familiar yet unknown..., seen countless times, but never experienced”².

Here in such given situation, exile and alienation seem to be an inescapable and inevitable human condition.

Agastya born of a mixed parentage:

Born of a mixed parentage, his father being a Bengali Hindu and his mother a Goanese Christian, Agastya becomes a metaphor of the incursion of the native Indian culture by the Western culture.

It's all in the name:

His uncle, Paltukaku calls him "an absurd combination, a boarding -school-English- literature education and an obscure name from Hindu myth." 3 He is named after a great Hindu sage, Agastya, but he is often asked by people like an engineer or Srivastava, "So! Agastya, what kind of name is Agastya, Bhai?"4 It is not surprising when 'Agastya's envy had then blurted out, he wished he had been Anglo-Indian, that he had Keith or Alan for a name, that he spoke English with their accent." 5

Quite significantly his name from Agastya to August is appropriated by the western discourse. Gauri Viswanathan notes that

the English education was introduced in India with an object to achieve and maintain political domination through cultural hegemony, by discretely introducing western values and perceptions among the natives.6

Agastya, being half-Bengali, is a product of this English education and upbringing only. Not only that his friends call him the 'last English man' or just 'hey English' and sometimes even 'hello Mother Tongue' – illogical and whimsical like most names selected by contemporaries" 7 but figure like Kumar, the S.P. Madna, who loves, to call him as "the English type" 8 because he can speak English more fluently than any other Indian language.

Agastya's tragedy concerning his name and identity reaches its climax when he, himself, is found confused what name he should be called by. He requests his friends: "and please call me Agastya, Or English, Or Ogu, or August."9 His names seemed like aliases, for his different lives. And this compulsion of a modern man to live different lives at different occasions actually makes him a cultural allotrope. Although, this builds up a paradoxical situation. And nothing could be more paradoxical than this that many of us have become like Agastya's father .As Agastya explains, "my father eats beef too. He's amazing he eats corned beef sandwiches and wears dhoti and reads the Upanishad in Sanskrit". 10 For most of us today being 'Indian' stands for what Agastya claims, "I suppose being Indian means being born an Indian citizen and not wanting to change citizenship." 11

Transformation from 'Agastya' to 'August' with a void:

But this transformation from Agastya to August is not complete. It contains a lack, a gap, a void. Homi K. Bhabha says that "it masks a threatening racial difference only to reveal the excesses and slippages of colonial power and knowledge".12 If Agastya is a product of English education, he also comes to question its authority. Many times he is confronted with the question what such irrelevances as Chaucer and Swift and Dryden are doing in the English classrooms of M.A. His professor at the College, Dr. Upadhyaya calls English in India a parody, a complete farce. He says:

At my old university I used to teach Macbeth to my M.A. English classes in Hindi. English in India is a burlesque... Now I spend my time writing papers for obscure journals on L.H. Myers and Wyndham Lewis, and teaching Conrad to a bunch of half-wits. 13

Agastya deliberately sets out to subvert the colonial value system by refusing to take its civilizing mission at its face value. Stokely Carmichael has expressed a similar view:

The West with its guns and its power and its might came into Africa, Asia, Latin America and the USA and raped it. And while they raped it they used beautiful terms. They told the Indians 'we're civilizing you, and we're, taming the West. And if you won't be civilized we'll kill you.' So, they committed genocide and stole the land, and put the Indians on reservations, and they said that they had civilized the country. 14

Agastya when asked to write an essay on "My Ambition", writes that his real ambition was to become

a domesticated male stray dog because they lived the best life. A stray dog was free; he slept a lot, barked unexpectedly and only when he wanted to end got a lot of sex. 15

The author sets a contrast in the next lines: "The class hadn't heard him, and had instead yelled, 'He is lying, his only ambition is to be an Anglo- Indian.'" 16 This is just a symbolic interpretation of what exactly the protagonist thinks of the whites. It is quite contrasting to what Dhruvo, Agastya's friend thinks of London. According to him, "London is 'nice', bits of it are like a 'washed' Calcutta, and all Bengalis will love it, being Anglophiles to their balls".17

Agastya also realizes that this is a country where trains are always late (as it had been four hours late during Agastya's journey to Madna,18) and where people's identity is not his personal behaviour but his chair or say, designation. Agastya took it quite surprisingly that people never forget to add his designation along with his name. 'IAS' almost became his surname. People asked him, "Are you Mr Sen,

IAS?"19 The IAS is only a post-colonial social and political construct within an elaborately designed hierarchy of power and it is only within this hierarchy that signifiers like IAS and IPS acquire meaning. Once outside this frame, even Srivastava and Kumar, the DM and the SP of Madna respectively, who are used to years of commanding, lose the aura. Shorn of the trapping of official power, they look ridiculous.

On the road Srivastava and Kumar looked a little odd, Agastya realized that he had never seen them walking. They looked like ordinary citizens who hadn't got rickshaw, one merely much fatter than the other. 20

Things are not helped either by his urban (read, western) upbringing and background. When Agastya wants to leave a good job of an IAS to work in a publishing firm, his father writes back to him in a letter:

My dear Ogu,.... 'This is what comes of living in a city and not knowing what the rest of India is like, or words to that effect.... It is true, however, that you have led so far, in Calcutta and Delhi, a comfortable big city life, wherein your friends and lifestyle have been largely westernised. 21

Not only professionally, but even socially and culturally Agastya feels alienated. Agastya retreats to his own private world, the privacy of his room in the rest house where "there would be marijuana and nakedness, and soft, hopelessly incongruous music (Tagore or Chopin), and thoughts that ferment in isolation." 22 Stuffed with marijuana trance, however hard he tries to live in the present, he is unable to shake his memories of the past which come flooding back to him. Once back in Delhi, he gets no reprieve from the feeling of his alienation. He realizes that this is no solution to his problems; it is only exchanging one kind of bridle with the other.

Alienation -syndrome has affected the whole modern generation:

He soon discovers that the feeling of dislocation, restlessness and alienation are not his problems alone but of the whole generation which, to use his father's words, 'does not oil its hair'. Dhruvo, who has been to Yale for his Ph.D. and has as a job with the City Bank, feels that he has been living an unreal life and is tired of it. What he finds that

all those expense accounts, and false accented secretaries, and talk of new York and head office, and ...man in Hong Kong, it's just not 'real', it's an imitation of something elsewhere: And I wear a tie,... kiss the wives of my colleagues on the cheek when we meet...; listen to Scott Joplin and Keith Jarrett and on weekends I see a Herzog film, or a Carlos Saura, it'sunreal. 23

Renu, Dhruvo's girlfriend who is now in Illinois, suffers from a sense of dislocation and wonders why she ever left India. Madan feels deeply ashamed of his sister who is going to Oxford on a Rhodes Scholarship and has acquired phony accents and manners.

Conclusion:

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Gauri Viswanathan: *Notes of a Native Son*. (London, 1964) p – 14.
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ibid., p.23
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Agastya, like his friends, comes to question the bases of the western metaphysics, the very worldview which has constituted him. This worldview creates an alien sensibility in him which produces a sense of estrangement from daily experience. Agastya disowns the western values but in this rejection is not implied a return to the pure pre-colonial past, because Agastya realizes that this return is neither possible nor desirable. Torn up into pieces with the concept of 'sexiness in the mind' and 'as an Indian (one) should live the life of contemplation', his search ends, he must continue to remain in exile.

R. P. Singh, in this context, has very aptly discussed alienation:

*Alienation has a triple aspect – it is a process of estrangement from a natural socio-cultural context, it is a condition arising as a result of such an estrangement, and it is the subjective experience of being in such a condition in which powerlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation, formlessness and self- estrangement become the distinguishing marks of the alienated individuals.*²⁴

Such an alienated individual like August is, in fact, a cultural allotrope.

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