Chapter Three

Upamanyu’s Protagonists’: Estranged Individuals

Cultural Alienation or Cultural Ambivalence is a world phenomenon today. The tremendous difference between two ways of life leads a person to a feeling of depression and frustration. This could be called as cultural shock. When a person leaves his own culture and enters another, his old values come into conflict with the new ones.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, alienation means “the action of estranging or state of estrangement in feeling or affection”. (1). According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, alienation is “A term used with various meanings in philosophy, theology, psychology and the social sciences, usually with emphasis on personal powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, cultural estrangement, social isolation, or self-estrangement”. (243). Based on the definitions of alienation it is understood that, broken relation or disintegration of relation is the reason of alienation. When life becomes complicated, the definitions of alienation also become more complicated. Alienation can be from other things; it can be from man himself; it can be intense and minute; it can be external or internal. The fact is that alienation is man’s indispensable fate. In real sense the situation of alienation arises only when there is total detachment from the former relation.

In the early condition of self-individuality man thinks himself related to the other and this tie is emotional. In this condition man does not know alienation. But when man’s relation with the other ends, it becomes the starting point of alienation from others. When mutual relationship is not developed between man and man, alienation arises.

In the personality of the modern man a void continuously covers his consciousness. An alienated man becomes a stranger towards his daily routine. He is forced to separate himself from his companions and self to become a stranger. Thus,
according to Fromm, ‘alienation is the result of capitalist society which disturbs the feeling of man. The growth of the personality of man and factors responsible for alienation are subject to the influence of social-conditions on human-existence’ (Escape from Freedom, 208-209).

Alienation is considered to be a universal phenomenon, which changes its form. In the modern age, man has the means of self-realisation and in the past man had self-awareness. In the past he used to live in conformity and proximity with nature and now he is the owner of nature and uses it as a means. He has become the maker of his destiny with the help of Science and Technology. That is why today, alienation has become a challenge for man. Man feels more alienated today and he himself is responsible for it.

Upamanyu Chatterjee’s maiden novel, English August: An Indian Story is a subtle metaphor of contemporary youth’s quest for self-realisation. The novel can be read at two levels. On the surface level the book is a commentary on the Administrative Services of India: the corruption in high places, high-handedness, inefficiency, the oppression of the system, the utter indifference of the administration to the eradication of social evils, the acute class consciousness among the IAS hierarchy. But at the deeper level it is a frank discussion of the predicament in which an intelligent and educated modern youth finds himself. There is a sense of dislocation from all traditions and conventions which he finds meaningless. The novel describes a journey - sometimes pathetic, sometimes humourous, even ridiculous - a journey from rootlessness to maturity, a struggle to come to terms with oneself.

Upamanyu Chatterjee’s English, August: An Indian Story is a fascinating tale of a budding bureaucrat under stress. Agastya Sen, the budding bureaucrat finds himself haunted from the very outset by existential angst and rootlessness. Being the child of the union of a Bengali father and Goanese mother, and, of a western style of education,
Agastya is a fit subject for, as the title of the novel indicates, a sense of absurdity. He goes to the place of his first posting as an IAS trainee, wondering what he would do for sex and marijuana in Madna.

The novel is set in independent India – India of the 80s. Agastya’s background which has been responsible for shaping his sensibility is established in the initial part of the novel. He is a product of a very prestigious public school at Darjeeling. The role of ‘modern education’ in disintegrating this tradition is suspicious in the eyes of a creative realist like Upamanyu Chatterjee.

Another significant novelist, Rohinton Mistry, in his *Such a Long Journey* hints amply to this situation when one of his characters remarks, “This was the bloody problem with modern education. In the name of progress, they discarded seemingly unimportant things without knowing that what they were chucking out of the window of modernity was tradition. And if tradition was lost, then the loss of respect for those who respected and loved tradition always followed” (61). Similarly the foundation of this alienating training and education is laid in the very beginning of the construction of the coveted structure.

Meenakshi Raykar has quoted in “The Intellectual in a State of Anomy” that Professor Nissim Ezekiel has perceptively pointed out in his review of the novel *English, August: An Indian Novel* in the *Indian Post* of August 21, 1988: “It is Agastya’s Darjeeling school that established his alienation, of which he remains conscious virtually throughout this ‘Indian Story’” (111). *English, August: An Indian Story*, unlike Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease*, is set in independent India – India of the 1980s, while the latter novel deals with the Nigerian society of the 1950s. That makes the two reflect at each other with significant intertextual load of meaning is the theme of state of anomie the intellectuals face as a result of colonization.
As a school boy Agastya Sen had been envious of some Anglo-Indian boys who spoke and behaved differently in an impressive manner, who were always with the Tibetan girls and claimed to know all about sex. In envy he blurted out; he wished he had been an Anglo-Indian, that he had Keith or Alan for a name, that he spoke English with their accent. From that day his friends gave him many new names ‘Last Englishman’, ‘hey English’ (2) and ‘August’ which he finally accepts. The background has been a very powerful alienating force which has left a sense of displacement in Agastya Sen. Another important factor characterising his different sensibility is the English language. His friend Dhrubo says, “August, you are going to get hazaar f*cked in Madna” (1). And added to this, his friend Dhrubo sardonically remarks during the course of their nocturnal journey to New Delhi railway station, where Agastya would board a Madna bound train, that he does not ‘look the role’ (3). Agastya comments “The English we speak is an amazing mix of Urdu and American. Nowhere else could languages be so mixed and be spoken with such ease. And our accents are Indian, but we prefer August to Agastya” (1).

Richard Cronin in The Oxford Guide to Contemporary World Literature says that Agastya’s life in Madna is “a bitter parody of the dislocation between the urbanized Western consciousness that Chatterjee says with his hero and the town to which Sen has been posted” (10). The noted commentator on the colonial encounter between Britain and India, Gauri Viswanathan notes that “The English education was introduced in India with an object to achieve and maintain political domination, through cultural hegemony, by discreetly introducing Western values and perceptions among the natives and moulding them as subjects” (“The Beginnings of English Literary Study in British India”,18).

The famous Indian critic, Tabish Khair, in his “Babu Fictions: Alienation in Contemporary Indian English Novels” emphasises the point that English language and the education imparted through it has the effect of constituting a subject. By implication,
August and his ilk have been ‘discursively constituted’ by the education they have received. And this became the cause of their alienation. Within the alienating effect of English, as adumbrated by Khair, comes even the creative writer who writes novels in this language. He relevantly observes,

…the discursively constituted subject will be alienated in a situation where discourses related to or emanating from the subject’s positioning in the socio-economic field are experienced as subordinated to discourses from other / dominant positions in the field. (26)

Agastya has beautifully summarized the problem of this ‘subset’ of a bigger set of the intellectuals in India. The problem is their colonial mentality. Decolonisation of India was not really a cultural decolonisation. On the contrary it led to neo-colonialism – characterized by proliferation of public schools and a growing affinity for Western materialistic culture and everything it stood for. That’s why, though Agastya is aware of his Indian accent, he also admits that he would like to be called ‘August’. ‘August’ represents the Greco European culture, whereas ‘Agastya’ has strong association with the ancient Vedic culture and ‘Agastya Sen’ is not confused about his affinities.

Another additional factor is that Agastya’s mother died of meningitis when he was less than three years of age. It had an effect on his growth which might not have been so smooth in emotional terms. Feelings of alienation and rootlessness have multiple roots in the case of Agastya. Western existential heroes naturally belonged to the 1960s the decade of counter culture, of marijuana and Pinko revolution, of rebellion and Flower power, of barricades, Beatles and Rolling Stones. These phenomena were raging in the West at a time when the Western youth passed through a phase of angst, alienation and incertitude. The socio-cultural establishment had become exhausted in its power to satisfy the new generation of rising aspirations. These phenomena gave to the then youth
a non-conforming identity and certitude. They felt that they were different to the old
guard establishment, its mores and values. This feeling of difference and non-conformity
satisfied the youth of the West, who happened to live at the particular civilizational hour
of the Western culture. But Chatterjee’s Agastya cannot find satisfaction in anything,
because he lacks a motivating cause. August also knows that he represents many who are
like him – with no special aptitude for anything, not even wondering how to manage, not
even thinking.

The novel *English, August: An Indian Story* is an attempt made to highlight how
Chatterjee produces a kind of interior visibility of his characters caught in cultural
dilemmas. In reality whether he likes it or not he finds himself all of a sudden in a global
locality, M.T.V. culture. Though his strategy may be refreshingly different, the deified
historical mission of art in the progress of humanity is certainly upheld, discreetly of
course, by the artist in the novel. This he achieves through the hegemony of the authentic
artistic dimension in his novels.

The novel *English, August: An Indian Story* reveals that, the protagonist, who
steeped in careerism, is a victim of the breakdown of meaningful communication and
relationship with his society. There is no assurance here that outward action reveals any
significant fact about the doer, nor is any claim that the public gestures provided by
society can achieve any real communication between individuals. It is remarkable that
the anti-heroic protagonist represents his anti-heroic milieu. As Thorslev writes “The
hero gives one the broader, and deeper perspective of the spirit of the age which he
represents” (*The Types and Prototypes*, 20).

Robert E. Spiller in his much discussed article titled ‘Literary History’ posits the
idea of the peak of a literary movement (“The Aims and Methods of Scholarship in
Modern Language and Literature”, 55) represented by literary production of a single or
closely related kind in a comparatively short period of time and space. The decade of 1980s, in the context of Indian fiction in English, marks just such a peak. Nearly two dozen significant novels have been written in this decade, almost all bearing a similarity. The common thread binding them all is the individual at the centre, struggling against the ugliness of life and the socio-political system.

The protagonists of novelists like Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan had belonged to a secure world where eternal reality stood by to ultimately dominate the temporary vicissitudes of life. But one finds in *English, August: An Indian Story* as well as in *Clear Light of Day, The Circle of Reason, Shame, Midnight’s Children, Plans for Departure, Yatra, etc.*, the human beings buffeted helplessly by the unfeeling social world which they encounter. These novels lack the staidness, solemnity and self-consciousness that once characterised the Indian English novel. This lack reflects the changes which have come about in the life of Indians. They are uninhibited; they are neither idealistic nor sentimental. They express the deep urge of the protagonist to speak out, unfettered by restraints. The shaking off of the traditional hiccups about materialistic enjoyment marks the life of the period of the 1980s of which Upamanyu Chatterjee’s Agastya Sen is a prominent representative. Spiller rightly thinks that fiction represents ‘the controlling temper and ideas of (its) time and place’ (“The Aims and Methods of Scholarship in Modern Language and Literature”, 55).

Agastya being brought up in cosmopolitan cities like Calcutta and Delhi all his life, finds it difficult to adjust to the ambience in Madna. The incidents set much of the tone of the novel as a marked pointer to the cultural confusion of Agastya. Agastya also recognizes the confusion: “Amazing mix, the English we speak… our accents are Indian, but we prefer August to Agastya” (1). The novel presents a new generation of Indians, strongly influenced by modern American culture. Agastya is an unlikely bureaucrat and
he does not even attempt to fit into the mould. All that he does as a trainee baffles him completely. But he is eager to find meaning and get a sense of direction in life. But he is basically drifting, unwilling and unable to commit himself fully to anything: “I don’t want challenges or responsibility or anything, all I want is to be happy” (148). Considering marijuana, day dreams, Marcus Aurelia’s “Meditations”, he finds preferable, his present life of constant motion, action and responsibility.

Agastya is pictured as a misfit in the rat-race of the world. His ‘cultural cripples’ have ‘missed the momentous, five decades of our century (229). He belongs to “the cola generation – the generation that doesn’t oil its hair” (47), “the generation of apes (28) and the generation that would love to get AIDS just because its raging in America” (76).

The problems of the protagonist were almost unapproachable, “he always wanted something with immediacy...” (68). He is a victim of the culture of runaway consumerism and careerism which puts him on a never-ending, ever-accelerating treadmill of desire, its fulfillment and more desire. While remaining tied to this treadmill, he wants happiness. The famous cartographer of modern consciousness, Ken Willber, diagnoses this disposition toward happiness as ‘simply pluralism infected with narcissism’ (Boomeritis, 35) meaning hyper-relativity about values and acute self-centredness. It means giving ultimate priority to wanting to feel better, not by grounding the subjective self in a shared relationship with the suffering humanity, but by decontextualising it from the vortex of the hard realities of life.

On the whole, Agastya Sen arises from the utter lack of control over his carnality and a desire for such life where there is no responsibility. He wants to live the life of a parasite. The reflection of such an absurd sense is evident from one of the incidents, while at school, he had written as an expression of his ambition of life that he wanted to be a street dog! He had searched himself and wrote that his real ambition was to become “a
domesticated male stray dog because they lived the best life. They were assured of food, and because they were stray they didn’t have to guard a house or beg or shake paws or fetch trifles or be clean or anything similarly meaningless to earn their food” (35). This is the lowest depth one could fall to, considering the fact that Agastya was at that time in the process of getting on the path of a bright future career. He is incapable of review and introspection because he cannot dare go for divergent thinking. He represents that class of intellectuals who are lonely and suffer from the absence of communication, not only with the without but also the within. The man whose ambition was to be assured of food without having ‘to guard a house’ joins the highest echelon of the Indian bureaucracy – the Indian Administrative Service.

Agastya is weak in his resolution, and consequently achieves nothing in life which can fulfil him as a personality. Matthew Arnold in his poem ‘Scholar Gipsy’ points out the reasons for man’s failure in life which aptly explain the condition of an anti-hero like Agastya who symbolises that of the modern Indian youth of the post-independence India, particular the India of the later decades of the twentieth century. Unlike Agastya and as a pointer to the difference of substance in the respective time, the Scholar Gipsy could succeed in life because he had one aim, one business, one desire which Agastya lacked absolutely.

The base, petty, unimportant, dirty, Madna is a town like thousands of others that dot the Indian landscape. Agastya describes the landscape of Madna as the most unhygienic place and regrets for being placed there:

Violent-green weeds hemming the drains, shacks, the chaos of the weekly bazaar, tribals in clothes of many colours, bicycles, merchandise on the road, grains, sugarcane, raw tobacco, trinkets for the woman, baubles for the child, cloth. (201)
In the very beginning of the novel he describes the railway station as,

A small tube-lit station, stray dogs, a few coolies, a man selling rusks and tea, a family of beggars arguing in an unfamiliar tongue around the taps. A sweating swarthy man came up to him and mumbled something. Glimpses of Madna on route; Cigarette and paan dhabas, disreputable food stalls both lit by fierce kerosene lamps, cattle and changing rickshaws on the road, and the rich sound of trucks in slush, from an overflowing drain he felt as though he was living someone else’s life. (5)

Chatterjee appears to stand in the line of those Indian sensitive minds who have tried to explore the actuality of religio-spiritual claim of Indians. Anita Desai in her Bye-Bye, Blackbird (1971) and Journey to Ithaca (1995) grapples with the question of the authenticity or otherwise of the generalized claim about India being a spiritual land. The suggested message of her exploration in the context of modern India is that “India is just another tired, poor, dirty and hungry third world country, though not devoid of unexpected and memorable compensations” (The Postmodern Indian English Novel: Interrogating the 1980s and 1990s, 405).

As soon as Agastya Sen, IAS, arrives at Madna he decides that, in so far as possible, he will live as though Madna did not exist. His companions are Sathe the cartoonist, Shankar the Deputy Engineer, and Bhatia the forest officer. It is interesting that while Agastya cannot communicate with the common people of Madna because they speak a different language, which remains unspecified the small group of people that he befriends are all, like him, the “English types” who read Heat and Dust and watch films like “Jewel in the Crown” on their videos.

There are many possible ways of looking at Agastya’s restlessness. It could be seen as an aspect of an urban-rural divide; as the gap between the administrator and the
administered; of the inability of cultures to harmonise and witness Agastya’s mixed parentage as the protagonist’s gropings to recover the ideals of the Gita. The novel, however, does not permit any complacent reading. The inability of the reader to arrive at any single interpretation complements the indecision that marks the protagonist’s sensibility. This fact is reinforced by the blurring of the line between the serious and the flippant, reality and fantasy.

Three aspects of *English, August: An Indian Story* make it a recognisably contemporary novel. The ease with the medium is the first. Reflection of larger issues in what seems to be an intensely private struggle, is the second. Finally, there is the unavailability to Agastya of options in life that earlier generations had found viable. This last one marks his predicament and indeed *English, August: An Indian Story* is a characteristic Indian novel of the 1980s.

Much of the beauty of the novel derives from Agastya’s continual self-introspection, his attempts to come to terms with himself:

He realized obscurely that he was to lead at least three lives in Madna, the official with its social concomitance, the unofficial which included boozing with Shankar and Sathe, and later, with Bhatia, and the secret, in the universe of his room, which encompassed jogging by moonlight. Each world was to prove educative, and the world beyond Madna was continually to interrupt and disturb him, letters and the radio, and ungovernable memories. (48-49)

Agastya, in the very beginning of the novel remains dumbstruck by the very unusual form of English that is spoken in India and above all wonders that such language would not exist in any part of the world: “Amazing mix, the English we speak. Hazaar fucked. Urdu and American,” Agastya laughed, “a thousand fucked, really fucked. I’m sure nowhere else
could languages be mixed and spoken with such ease” (1). These lines further exhibit the
direct attack of the protagonist on the Indian language and the incapability to speak English in
its own style. It is a reflection of the alienated feature of the protagonist Agastya.

Agastya’s story is unfinished. He reconsiders his idea of leaving a covetous job
for future prospects. Sanjay Kumar rightly comments in “The Nowhere Man: The Exile
Self in Upamanyu Chatterjee’s English, August: An Indian Story” that Upamanyu
Chatterjee succeeds in depicting a complex view of the post-colonial society in which
exile and alienation seem to be an inseparable human condition.

Agastya Sen is alienated from his job, society and culture, yet his alienation is not
genuine. English, August: An Indian Story charts the education of a young civil servant
sent to a backwater town to lord it over India’s dumb millions. Sen’s education begins on
the long train ride: provincial India, he finds, insists that a man categorize himself.

“Agastya? What kind of a name is Agastya? asks his travelling companion, not
reasonably” (4). Agastya-August to his Indian friends, who might just as well be English
– doesn’t sound like a name that any IAS officer would sport, certainly not any IAS
officer keen on exacting respect from the common folk whom he can make or break. But
Agastya, an ascetic in the Ramayana who gives Rama a bow and arrow, is very much the
sort of name that an IAS officer should have. IAS officers are later day ascetics and
sages who go off into the wild, helping to develop the country, just as Srivastav, who
walks in Madna as though he owned it, asks his newly arrived junior to explain his name.

Agastya wonders whether the ignoramus’s mother didn’t make his head spin into
sleep when he was still a baby “with the verses of some venerable Hindu epic” (15) who
knows whether our IAS officers would not be better administrators and more Indian if
they were properly schooled in the Indian epics. On another occasion Agastya is half
prepared to answer a question about his name with “It’s Sanskrit for one who turns the
flush just before he starts pissing and then tries to finish pissing before the water disappears”. Predictably, the supposedly cultivated wife of the collector of Paal finds Agastya’s name lovely, “really, so ethnic” (81). Agastya as uncle remonstrates:

You are an absurd combination, a boarding-school-English-Literature education and an obscure name from Hindu myth. Change your name officially, please, to any of those ridiculous alternatives that your friends have always given you. (129)

The protagonist’s name itself arouses curiosity in others. And Agastya explains: “he is a saint of the forest in the Ramayana, very ascetic. He gives Ram a bow and arrow. He’s there in the Mahabharata, too. He crosses the Vindhyas and stops them from growing” (1). Agastya suffers from lambent dullness and boredom. He considers himself as one “with no special attitude for anything”, (3) and thinks, “I should have been a photographer, or a maker of Ad films, something like that, shallow and urban” (13). He considers himself a misfit, anchorless, unhinged and misplaced and does not seem to enjoy the role he has earned for himself by virtue of his competitive qualifications. Accustomed to metropolitan life, he finds happiness in nothing and thinks of himself as misbegotten in a world which he does not seem to fit in. Agastya does not enjoy his new role and finds it difficult to get used to the working of his job and the place. He feels “emptier than usual” and thinks that he is “wasting my time here” (92). He suffers from strange loneliness whereas he had wished to be alone. He considers himself as one of the vanished in Madna. He relapses quite often into fantasy to escape from being “ravaged by mosquitoes with no electricity, with no sleep in a place he disliked, totally alone with a job that did not interest him, in murderous weather, and now feeling madly sexually aroused” (92).

At the very beginning of the novel, Upamanyu Chatterjee spells out his protagonist’s predicament:

Anchorless – that was to be his chaotic concern in that uncertain year, battling a sense of waste was to be another other fodder too, in the farrago
of his mind, self-pity in an uncongenial clime, the incertitude of his reactions to Madna, his job, and his inability to relate to it – other abstractions too, his niche in the world, his future, the elusive mocking nature of happiness, the possibility of its attainment. (25)

It is this theme of “anchorlessness” the weariness of an era, that loneliness of an entire generation that the novelist explores along with the satiric portraiture of the whole Indian Administrative Services. The novelist at the beginning of the novel stresses his protagonist’s sense of “dislocation”. Agastya is in a state of “dislocation” in an environment offering him legitimate roots. He starts looking for roots, when he is physically dislocated in Madna. Ridiculously enough the quest for identity begins with food:

The problem of food gave him something concrete for cogitation. Lying on the bed, staring blankly up at the ceiling.... He would ask himself where his next meal was coming from... Before Madna, he had always taken food for granted, like air.... Now he did hope that there were places in Madna where one could eat cheaply. (65-66)

Agastya as an Indian, considers himself as an alienated being on an alien land. Madna, even the food in Madna seemed to him not fit for eating and survival. And he considers his existence in Madna as the most difficult task.

The agonising remembrances haunt Agastya constantly. The theme of the anti-heroic intellectual suffering from anomie and rootlessless is a recurring one in some of the works of leading contemporary Indian novelists writing in English. Arun Joshi’s The Last Labyrinth is a celebrated case in point. Its protagonist, Som Bhaskar, like Agastya Sen, is burdened under the tremendous pressures on his mind rocked by a psychic turbulence. He is endowed with a highly intellectual and scientific mind which is caught up in a maelstrom of ideas, values, and issues of philosophy and meta-physics. But he is unable to get a fix on reality; so he is miserable. He laments,
Sitting around, I get into arguments: with the living and the dead, with myself.... Through the light of my days and the blackness of my nights....I had sung the same strident song: I want. I want. I want. I want. (The Last Labyrinth: 10-11)

The predicament of Upamanyu Chatterjee’s Agastya Sen is more anti-heroic than Arun Joshi’s Som Bhaskar. This intesified anti-heroism lies in the fact that Agastya, unlike Som, is preoccupied with petty issues of day-today escape routes from official engagements.

According to Albert Camus in The Myth of Sisyphus, “In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile.... This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity” (3).

Thus, the novelist tells us that slowly but surely that Agastya is trying to come out of the cocoon of financially-well-off and public school-background in whose warmth and comfort he had divorced himself from the harsh reality of life.

This attempt is manifested a little later in his desire to keep him informed of what was going on around him. In other words, he is trying to get over his sense of dislocation. As the novelists puts it:

On some nights he would listen to the nine o’clock radio news. Earlier he had generally avoided newspapers and what they called current affairs. But in Madna he began to listen to the radio carefully, sometimes just to have another voice in the room. It became a major link, the only objective one, really, with the world beyond Madna. (73)

The novelist, thus, stresses Agastya’s sense of dislocation and loneliness for example, “at the beginning he played out in one day, one kind of life of the lonely”, (74)
and it is his sense of dislocation that brings him closer to Bhatia, from forest colony officer: “he would never have accepted that he and Bhatia could have anything in common, but now they palpably did their dislocation” (76). Thus scattered throughout the first half of the novel are phrases such as a sense of “dislocation”, he is “just another person out of concord with the present” (89). Even the protagonist’s insomnia seems to be symptomatic of this sense of dislocation and his efforts to drown himself in drugs and booze and masturbation, his need to “fantasize without restraint” (92). The novelist conveys this sense of dislocation in existential terms:

Suddenly he (Agastya) was laughing loudly in that silent, closed room
God, he was fucked-weak, feverish, aching in a claustrophobic room.
Being ravaged by mosquitoes, with no electricity, with no sleep, in a place
he disliked, totally alone, with job that didn’t interest him, in murderous
weather, and now feeling madly sexually aroused. His stomach contracted
with his laughter. (92)

The protagonist’s sense of alienation is counter pointed against his father’s maturity and knowledge of life, and the letters that he writes to his son are an eloquent testimony of these traits. For example, this advice: “But Ogu, remember that Madna is not on alien place. You must give it time. I think you will like your job eventually, but if you don’t think concretely of what you want to do instead, and change” (95). The novel however emphasises his growing maturity and self-realisation. This is evident in the books that he reads, Marcus Aurelius and the Readers Digest, the way he wants to bring succour to the helpless frog, whom he does not evict from his room into the cruel world unknown to himself. These are the states through which he progresses. The novelist shows the protagonist’s initial doubts: “Not even twenty four hours over and he felt
unhinged, without the compensation of insight of a wisdom. The job is both bewildering and boring” (27). Gradually his views about the people change:

I find these people absurd, full with one mixed up culture and writing about mother what kind of audience are they aiming at. That’s why their India is just not real, a place of fantasy, or of confused metaphysics, a sub continent of goons. All their Indians are caricatures. Why is that Because they really are no universal stories, because each language is an entire culture. (48)

Upamanayu Chatterjee is a novelist who believes in standing his own ground, without being bound by the fashions of his times. Shashi Tharoor, the well-known Indian novelist whose *The Great Indian Novel* became very famous, writes about *English, August: An Indian Story* ‘Evocative, candid and in some parts, inspired, this portrait of a district administrator’s life in a rural backwater portrays an India, and an Indian perspective, unknown in English language works’ (“Of Books Read and Remembered”, *The Book Review*, 16).

It is a known fact that India is a land of unity in diversity marked with different language, culture, customs, religion and tradition. But the protagonist as an alienated being is not ready to accept the fact of ‘mixed culture’ as a matter of pride but looks upon it as an issue of absurdity. Agastya, moreover considered his personal life to be kept away from the view of the society in one of the instances. Shankar, the Deputy engineer’s conversation with Agastya is evident to this fact. This fact again reflects the ambivalent attitude of the protagonist, that matters pertaining to privacy or private life are not to be enclosed in public, especially the reality:

For most Indians of your age, just getting any job is enough. You were more fortunate, for you had options before you. They had been strolling on
the lawns at dusk in Calcutta, with the roar of traffic in Dalhousie square beyond the walls. These sound like paternal homilies, don’t they, but you’ve always had surrogate parents, your aunts, and then in Delhi, you Pultukaku (Agastya’s uncle), and we’ve not really spent much time together. (34)

Agastya is ‘a good name’ to Shankar, the Deputy engineer in Minor Irrigation, who shares the circuit house with Agastya. He says:

Agastya, a good name, quite 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, Somatype, good quality scotch, bottled for twelve years. (28)

Similarly at a crucial moment in the novel, Mrs. Rajan the wife of the Deputy Superintendent of Police happened to question the protagonist: “... Agastya you have a lovely name, really; so ethnic – how would you define the word “Indian?” (187). Agastya avoids the question, for he is in a quandary not knowing the cultural and mythic import of his name whereas he knows well his social status as an IAS Officer. This linguistic displacement and play brings to the force the intricate relationship between colonialism and its entrenched influence on post colonial subjects even after the achievement of political independence and the dismantling of the so-called structures of colonialism. There continues to be deep-rooted influence of those institutions on education and jobs resulting in alienation of the participants, as their own cultural “referents” are absent in the whole process.

Agastya who represents himself as the product of the ambivalent culture, is not ready to share his bathroom with a frog and goes even to the extent of cursing it and his disbelief on Indian superstitious belief.
Agastya showed him (Vasant) the frog. “There the frog looked at complete rest, almost philosophic. How do we push it out?” Vasant gave him a look. Agastya wilted. “You think it should remain there? But I don’t want to share my bathroom with a frog … Isn’t its skin poisonous? A snake will follow it because snakes eat frogs don’t they? What’d you mean frogs bring luck…” But Vasant won. The frog stayed, off and on, for months. It was quite peaceful. Sometimes in those afternoons Agastya would shield himself behind the door and throw mugs of water at it. But it always moved only of its own volition, sometimes hopping into the room to look for a corner where it could immobilize itself into some amphibious nirvana. What a simple life the bastard leads, thought Agastya enviously, and after a few days gave it a name Dadru. (97)

Agastya was even taken up by the alienated life of a frog without anyone to rule over it and envied at it.

Agastya goes for ‘soft options like *Marcus Aurelius* indulging in sexual fantasies, exercising, boozing and smoking. His mundane life consists of dozing a little in his claustrophobic room, watching lizards racing across the room, day-dreaming, thinking of the past, trying to recognize and force out of it a pattern, extracting an invitation for meal either from his seniors, friends or subordinates to escape the awful meals prepared by the guest house cook, and visiting various offices to learn intricacies of bureaucracy. In such a smoothening atmosphere life becomes a bleak business with a tantalizing, painfully elusive, definite but clichéd goal. And he does not see a way out of his uneasiness and suffocation. He wants to run away from this situation and even thinks of leaving the present job to join his relative in publishing business in Delhi. “I don’t want to be happy”, he observes (148). His uncle namely Parthiv Sen whom Agastya called as Pultukaku, is
right in his own way when he calls it flippancy and says to Agastya, “you are interested in nothing and you think that is a virtue” (161).

Agastya’s uncle reminds of his earlier objection, to Agastya’s parent’s marriage and had predetermined the children will culturally be mongrels.

His Pultukakur (Agastya’s uncle) had, as usual original objections to his brother’s marriage with a Goan. Your Children will culturally be Mongrels. The past makes us what we are, you will deprive them of coherence. But no one ever listened or bothered with him. (129)

His father, too, tried to persuade his son by projecting limitless possibilities of experience and knowledge of the new world through his letters. He writes in one of his letters:

Your job will provide an immense variety, and will give you glimpse of other situations and existences which might initially prove startling. Your dissatisfaction now seems to wear me out….But Ogu, remember that Madna is not an alien place. You must give it time. I think you will like your job eventually. But if don’t, think concretely of what you want to do instead, and change. (94 – 95)

However Agastya feels himself as “a dot in this hinterland” (95) and the letters such as these do not make any positive impact on his mind, which is clear from the letter written in response to his father. It reads: ‘I’m, sorry but what you read in my last letter was true. I just can’t get used to the job and the place. I’m wasting my time here, and not enjoy the wasting. This can be a sickening feeling (131).

His father considers his metropolitan upbringing to be the principal cause of his tendency to shirk the responsibility. He puts it in his next letter:

This is what comes of living in a city and not knowing what the rest of India is like…. It is true, however, that you have led so far, in Calcutta and
Delhi, a comfortable big city life, wherein your friends and life style have been largely westernized. When we had last met I had said that your job was going to be an immensely rich experience. By what I had meant your exposure to a different kind of environment. Madna must have placed your Delhi and Calcutta in perspective, it must have …. At this moment, Madna might seem dull to you and life perhaps unsettling, but do not decide to leave your job for only this reason. Ogu, do not choose the soft option just because it is the soft option, one cannot fulfill oneself by doing so. (149)

The government offices teach Agastya not about the intricacies of administration, but something by the “ways of the wider world” (71). Anchorless he had arrived in Madna to keep afloat the ship of state; and in Madna, enlivened by the company of a frog sunk in “amphibious nirvana” (97), he learns “the importance of restlessness” (165). Life imposes its own patterns upon the living; and with the wisdom of a man whose hair is turning white, the young Agastya finds that in Madna living had become a simpler business, gliding from day to day and discovering more and more what he did not want” (177). But in the life of an IAS man, there can be little room for renunciation, simplicity, and non-possessiveness, and so Agastya must leave the coveted IAS, and leave it not for a job with the publishing company of his cousin Tonic, who attributed to Wittgenstein the saying that India lives in its village, but for the rather more nourishing tonic of Marcus Aurelius’s meditation.

Towards the end of the novel there are many facts of self-introspection like some philosophical sayings:

My best years, my past, is here, bittersweet because it is gone. Whatever you choose to do, you will regret everything, or regret nothing. Remember, and Sathe laughed softly. ‘You’re not James Bond, you only like once. (285)
He lied, but he lied so well this sad Roman who had also looked for happiness in living more than one life, and had failed, but with such grace. So the protagonist remains alienated in his own land with alienated thoughts. In many instances Agastya finds himself being compelled into a state against his wish and will. This is the same in Madna.

Agastya was enraged at himself, for agreeing to the afternoon, for being in Madna, for a job that compelled him to be polite to Srivastav and his wife for being in the job he was, for not having planned his life with intelligence, for having dared to believe that he was adaptable enough to any job and circumstance, for not knowing how to change either, for wasting a life. He watched the chairs being arranged in rows and the tables being hidden by bed sheets and couldn’t believe his future. (112)

So all through, Agastya regrets and repents for his stay in Madna and reconciles with compulsion and finds no choice out of it.

There are other clues that point to a slow metamorphosis taking place in the character of the protagonist. Agastya, a specimen of the generation that does not oil its hair makes friends with Sathe, the cartoonist who seems to bridge the gap between Agastya and his father, with the grim present and nostalgic past. And it is Sathe who helps the protagonist to slowly come to terms with himself. It is through the influence of the company of Sathe that Agastya goes in the quest of the Sadhu; it is Sathe who blends the reality with the myth and the legend of the Sadhu and of the myth of the fisher king.

Some obscure tribal chieftain had a bastard child. He discovered both the woman and the son. She committed suicide in this pool and the waters turned red … she abandoned the child on one of these stones. Somehow the child survived in this 1000 square yard Oasis….But the waters remained red, and they wouldn’t turn normal until the chieftain said he
was sorry. Then there was a great drought…Everyone went to the king and said, Help. He came here and was hit on the head by lots of guilt. He renounced his kingdom to his legitimate children and came here to stay. So father and son stayed together, the father turned holy and taught the son about the wicked world, meaning himself. The waters turned clear and thousands of fish bobbed up in this pool. (282 – 83)

Thus, the legend of the Sadhu symbolically relates to the protagonist’s quest for self-realization and his attempt to divine a meaning of life. The words are from Marcus Aurelius. “Today I have got myself out of all my perplexities; or rather, have got the perplexities out of myself for they were not without but within. They lay in my own outlook” (283). He thinks his self-recognition will be complete if he goes on a month’s holiday and gives him enough to ponder over the intricacies of existence.

I feel confused and awful Journey after journey, by train and jeep, just motion. Integration meetings, Revenue Meetings, Development. First the job didn’t make sense and I thought then, when it does, I’ll settle down when it did it didn’t help. I’d always be wandering, thinking Chaotically of alternatives, happy images of my past mocking. Most of the time I felt guilty. At Chipanthi I thought, if my mind wasn’t so restless, if it cohered somehow, then I’d be working, getting water to a village, something concrete. Even at Baba Ramanna’s I felt guilty, immersed in myself, while a doctor had worked a miracle. (284)

He realizes that he can bring a drastic change in the administration and is aware that it is due to his restless mind that makes him to do anything worthwhile, and this prides his conscious and he feels guilty.

But these activities like bringing water to a village and meeting Baba Ramanna’s son, have been steps in his self-education, unconscious attempts to come out of the warm,
comfortable shell of the past, finding release from happy but mocking memories. As he himself puts it ‘he quite enjoyed himself’ at Baba Ramanna’s Rehabilitation Home for lepers. Even though he says,

he felt a little sick – at the immensity of a human ambition, but also at its nobility and virtue, at the limitlessness of the potential of human endeavour, but also the infinite patience and craft required to bring the endeavour of fruition. (235 – 36)

This reality of human goodness impinges on his unconscious and he confesses to Neera his friend later, “he envied Baba, Ramanna and the Naxalites of Jompanna not their nobility of purpose, but their certitude at knowing what to do with themselves” (238). This is something Agastya has yet to learn. And it is Sathe who comes up with a mature insight into the heart of things and adds a further rung in the ladder of the protagonist’s self-recognition. “Whatever you choose to do, you will regret everything, or regret nothing. Remember… you’re not James Bond, you only live once”, (285) and so the final moment of truth: “He had once dreamed of regression, into the mild warmth of an autumn sun. But now reflux appeared to be impossible” (287).

Agastya’s view toward religion and faith remains disjoint just like the views of an English man. This is evident from the lives describing the Durga Pooja. On the whole he remains an acculturated being. Durga had been put up, as usual, opposite the stage, about sixty yards away. The demon Mahishasur lay bleeding at her feet, rictus of defeat on his face she was surrounded by insense and silk, fattened eyes in a yellow face. The two drummers, small hard men relaxed in a corner, smoking (163). According to Agastya the great traditional event of Durga Pooja also makes him feel as an acculturated being and does not seem to move him spiritually or emotionally towards one’s culture.

A. K. Ramanujam, well-known for his preoccupation with roots and Hindu world views, in his seminal essay about the philosophical style of the Indian mind, stresses that
‘contrary to the notion that Indians are spiritual, they are really material-minded. They are materialists...’ (“Is There an Indian Way of Thinking”, 41). He clinches his argument by reminding us of the fact in India even the neutral categories of time and space are considered as having good or bad properties.

Agastya’s sense of alienation deepens not finding a reasonable answer to the question as to who he is. He lacks a definite sense of identity which comes from being rooted in one’s culture. The notion of dislocation and identity are interconnected. Every human subject is necessarily “encultured” and an identity is constituted out of cultural experience. Agastya has no doubt that he is an Indian, a Bengali. But he is distanced from his native culture and tradition, from ties that bind family, friends, history, and myths of the land. Brought up by surrogate parents in the absence of a mother, educated in a boarding school in Darjeeling when he paid occasional visits to his father, Agastya does not develop very strong family bonds. Home is not for him the place, which “is the reservoir of public myths and private memories” (“Diasporic Identities in Third Spaces” 95). He does not get his education or training in the indigenous cultural texts, such as the *Bhagavata*, the *Puranas* or the *Gita*. English translation of the *Ramayana* is a mere literary curiosity for him and while at Madna when he reads a verse aloud from *Gita*, “Strong men know not despair, Arjuna , for this wins neither heaven nor earth” his own voice sounds strange and unfamiliar (195). He is unable to connect; does not feel connected and the words of the *Gita* do not register in his mind. He desperately feels the need for believing in something, “in anything beyond himself” (273), but fails. Agastya recalls that all the while Durga Pooja meant “watching the women in eye blinding silk, and releasing balloons against the night sky (163). Faith for him has always been just festivity. The protagonists with their feeling of alienation and dislocation in Madna
represent themselves as hybrids and although their hybridity delights, it rankles when it comes too close to erasing comfortable boundaries.

At the superficial level it is a satirical portrait of Indian Administrative Service and at a deeper level, *English, August: An Indian Story* is the record of self-discovery:

> District administration is largely a British creation, like the railways and the English language, another complex and unwidely bequest of the Raj. But Indianization (of a method of administration, or of a language) is integral to the Indian story. Before 1947 the collector was almost inaccessible to the people, now he keeps open house, primarily because he does a different, more difficult job. He is as human and as fallible, but now others can tell him so, even though he still exhibits the old accoutrements (but now Indianized) of importance – the flashing orange light on the roof of the car, the passes for the first row at the sitar recital, which will not start until he arrives and for which he will not arrive until he has ensured by telephone that everyone else who has been invited has arrived first. In Madna, as in all of India, one’s importance as an official could be gauged by how long one could keep a concert waiting. (10)

Thus the collector’s attempt to enhance his image through habitual unpunctuality goes hand in hand with his unabashed use of peons as domestic helps in his bungalow:

> Many peons, officially government servants, did the domestic chores of successive Collectors. Many coveted the job, preferring to clean the shit of the progeny of a Collector’s than to shuttle files in an office. Their priorities made Sens, for in the office the Collector was a million rungs away, but at home while they were bringing him his shoes or taking away his slippers, they were close enough to grovel for their desires, for a little
land, for the expedition of a government loan, for a peon’s post in some officers for their sons….Of course they shirked at home as much as they would have shirked at office….The Collectors and their wives believed vehemently in the indignity of labour (so did most of Madna believed that one’s social standing was in inverse proportion to the amount of one’s work that one did oneself).….The other party to the contract, the peons believed in the indignity of labour, it is part of the Indian story. (57)

Upamanyu Chatterjee in this novel tries to highlight the image of the anti-heroic bureaucrat vis-a-vis his supposed duties as a public servant. The remark of N. C. Saxena catches the situation of the anti-hero like Agastya Sen admirably:

> It is said that one would find only three books in the house of an IAS officer - a railway timetable because he is always on the move, a film magazine because that is all he reads and, of course, the civil list that describes how many in the system are senior to him. ([Improving Programme Delivery](https://example.com), 54)

The Indian Administrative Service has its own hierarchy which gives rise to subtle class distinctions and supercilious attitude to other services and someone who has risen from the ranks. On account of Agastya’s nature of the job which included endless meetings and endless files that he had to encounter with, he intends to relieve the boredom parties and picnics much of which leaves him cold; he sums it up in succinct phrase: “Lambent dullness” (14). Agastya reveals his generation’s angst against social, political and moral institutions with irreverence. The feeling of alienation is not his own problem alone, but it is of the whole generation of the 1980s.

Agastya Sen represents in *English, August: An Indian Story* as trying to share and acquire the trappings of the new culture of global cosmopolitanism. The core of this
cosmopolitanism prescribed that ultimately every society would have to be self-critical and re-examine what has to be retained from its traditions and what has to be jettisoned. Ashis Nandy is quite relevant here:

This self-examination, of course, was conducted not from the point of view of traditions or, for that matter, from ‘culture-free’ or ‘culture-fair’ vantage grounds (as psychologists define the theoretical posture). In practice, it meant nothing more than waging an uncompromising battle against anything that went against the newly internalised now-clipped vision of a desirable society that emerged directly out of the European Enlightenment. ("The Future of Dissent", 42)

As a BDO in Jompanna Agastya learns certain unpalatable truths about development, about the pathetic condition of the tribals and about that fact that even tribals can hit back when goaded past endurance, the way they cut off Mohan’s (Assistant conservator of forests) hands who tries to rape a tribal woman.

In the view of Vimala Rama Rao, one charge made against this novel is that it ‘seems to be competing with the Taluka officer for tedium, documentary with relentless accuracy of every single syllable of the conversation of the self-satisfied and uninteresting bureaucrats who flock its pages’ ("The Literary Criterion", 79). This charge is valid, but only at the superficial level. It is through the lived lives of ‘the self-satisfied and uninteresting bureaucrats that the real core of the anti-heroic banality of the modern Indian youth and life comes out in the novel with devastating power of Chatterjee’s fictional imagination whose source of sustenance is in our undesirable actualities. It is known from Allen Walter, that most of the authors ‘betray their opinion on the characters and situations and in as much as every novel is an extended metaphor of the author’s view of life on the life itself, they do so by the very choice of the characters they write about,
the thoughts and feelings they give them, and the behaviour and motives they attribute to them’ (*The English Novel*, 16-17).

*English, August: An Indian Story* reflects the protagonist’s odyssey of self-discovery and an insider’s view of the intricacies of Indian Administrative Services. The novel also contains interesting insights into the role of English in India, the state of education and through many characters as Dhrubo and Shankar and an insight into the other half of Agastya’s persona is projected.

Upamanyu Chatterjee also does some plain speaking about the status of English in India. Agastya recalls his professor’s remarks about the teaching of English in India:

At my old University I (Professor) had to teach *Macbeth* to my M.A. English classes in Hindi. English in India is burlesque…. I (Professor) spend my time writing papers for obscure journals on I. H. Myers and Wyndham Lewis, and teaching Conrad to a bunch of half-wits. (24)

But surprisingly, real down-to-earth, utilitarian attitude to English comes from Srivastav, the Collector:

The English we speak is not the English we read, English books, and anyway, these are two different things. Our English should be just a vehicle of communication, other people find it funny, but how we speak shouldn’t matter as long as we get the idea across….Now people with no experience of these schools (Hindi medium schools) say….that we should throw English out of India. Rubbish, I say, many other things are far more important….It is still important to know English, it gives one… confidence. (59-60)

Agastya’s friend Dhrubo, obviously is meant to be Agastya’s alter-ego. He does and says things that Agastya would never dare. Though he has been a yale and appears to
be terribly emancipated, he decides to appear for the civil service exams, because his work is more “unread” than Agastya’s job at Madna. Dhrubo appears to be disillusioned both with his work at Citibank and his glimpses of the ‘First World’. But he doesn’t seem to understand.

Agastya considers himself inhabiting an alien land among strangers. Moreover he feels quite comfortable with only those characters, like Dhrubo his friend, Sathe, the Cartoonist, Shankar, the Engineer who also exhibit certain percentage of his views and attitude towards their life in Madna. Agastya is attracted to Shankar who is dedicated to thumri music and Sathe to his cartoons. Both despite, having no pretensions to elitism have attempted to evolve a modern Indian imagination. Chatterjee even sees in these debaunched artists a proto-type for a modern Indian culture, a synthesis of all the fractured parts of the Indian sensibility, the orthodox past, the colonial experience and the modern post-independent India. And above all they consider themselves in the quest for self-identify and under the influence of cultural conflict. But on account of the extreme compulsion of his father, Agastya tries to pass his hard days with extreme tolerance but earnestly looks forward for a transfer to a better place which is the only means by which he could reduce his alienated feeling and his disgusting attitude towards life and work.

Agastya Sen the anti-hero represents his time, that is the last quarter of the twentieth century Indian urban life at multiple levels. In being a mean sensual man, he stands for the sexual permissiveness rising its ugly head in the urban-metropolitan Indian life under the influence of Western toxic cultural influences. This permissiveness is linked to the idea of popularly assumed good life symbolised by materialistic amenities and enjoyment. Shobha De, an author and columnist concentrating on urban Indian life has tried to take an accurate snap of the modern urban Indian mindscape in her article ‘Ruling Fantasies’. She writes: while we in India do not have the exact equivalent of a J.
Lo (Jennifer Lopez) on our popular culture map, the fact remains that today’s urban Indian can and does identify completely with what Jennifer is saying all the contradictions of the essential message notwithstanding. ‘Want’ is the key. Everybody wants more. And if that is not accurately reflected in the media, it is because of the cultural baggage inbuilt into our psyche (“Ruling Phantasies”, 16). The emergence of a new elite, powerful and assertive, is invariably accompanied by a new cultural style which suits its taste but irks the tradition-bound persons.

The novel ends on a note of confusion in Madna’s contribution to the moulding of the protagonist’s character. If Madna the sordid, backward place has not been able to give him anything positive, it has at least been able to arouse him out of his smug complacency and make him see there is another world than the one young man like Agastya that substitutes fittingly the masturbation, marijuana and booze; where no language is understood unless it is spiced with four-letter words and no food as tasty as marijuana. He decides to go on leave for a year and think hopefully to come to a more meaningful existence.

Another very important aspect of the novel *English, August: An Indian Story* is the message that the Indian society did not undergo cultural decolonization. The fatal flaw of Agastya’s existence as a human being constructed by his past and present, his past studentship imbued with the blind inculturation of Western values and his present as a highly placed Indian public servant posted in one of the backward regions of the country. The contrast between Agastya and Madna becomes a powerful metaphor for the alienated relationship between the class of bureaucrats and the mass of Indians whom they have been asked to serve. The unmistakable message of the novel is the suggestion that what is called Indian Civil Service is neither Indian nor civil.
Agastya Sen suffers because he is split between two divergent pulling factors which work at his psychic level. He has become amoral in his orientation toward life and relationships under the pressure of his anglicized preferences and careeristic thrust of his youth days. But somewhere deeper at his core he is sad; as Upamanyu Chatterjee remarks in an online chat with a magazine, “My protagonist is God-fearing and family-loving. He hates himself for casting dirty looks at a friend’s wife, mother, etc.,” (The Hindu, April 2004).

The novel, The Last Burden by Upamanyu Chatterjee brings a realistic picture of the middle class life and reopens the sensitive reader to the renewal scrutiny of the middle-class Indian society. And through this novel the novelist gives the impact of what happens to familial ties in the fast-changing economic scenario created by the cataclysmic hurling of India into modernity. The author depicts the protagonist as trying to shed the ‘burden’ of the family ties, the ground of his operation being the personal world of familial relationships. In an interview Upamanyu Chatterjee disclosed frankly his thematic indicative as the vehicle to expresses his concept of the Indian anti-hero. He (Upamanyu Chatterjee) said, “The next book will again be a Last Burden kind of book, and then I’ll revert to Agastya, I plan to alternate themes” (“An interview with, Upamanyu Chatterjee”, The Hindu) This clear-cut idea about alternating themes from a young and promising Indian novelist proves his commitment to explore more and more the anti-heroic Indian urban personality through the twin solicits of Indian bureaucracy and Indian family. These are the two aspects for Upamanyu Chatterjee in which the modern, English-educated, urban-Indian protagonist displays his lack of nobility, disesteem for values and his straits of alienation from the roots as well as his larger community whether signified by the common people whom Agastya Sen in English,
August: An Indian Story, is supposed to serve or the family which expects warmth and responsibility from Jamun in The Last Burden.

This projected creative enterprise shows his belief that the alienation and the moral degeneration of the Indian protagonist are best reflected through his engagement with the two much-roistered institutions of bureaucracy and family. It is these two institutions in which, the average English educated Indian personality plays its anti-heroism marked by multiple alienation, moral ennui and purposelessness of life.

The novelist Upamanyu Chatterjee in The Last Burden comes out as an uncompromising realist regarding the image of the Indian protagonist. The novel reflects the attitude of the Indian writers of present time. A host of Indian authors like Salman Rushdie and V. S. Naipaul, who write books for the Western readership, but Upamanyu Chatterjee features as one of the few novelists who write for the Indian one.

One finds the views of writers like Naipaul, Rushdie, Hari Kunjru and Zadie Smith as belonging to a tradition that is less comfortable for the cultured Western reader and critic face up to, as ‘they are the mirror images that make the liberal West feel comfortable with itself, because it feels that it is gazing on them (and their works), it is reading and championing the others’ (“Mirror Mantra” Literary Review, The Hindu). These writers reflect the new post-war multi-cultural West. The common Indian readers feel that as far as the popularity of the works of the modern Indian English novelist depicting India is concerned, Naipaul is eternally pessimistic and submitted and Rushdie amazingly reminiscing, while Upamanyu Chatterjee is intransigently realistic. He has captured the widening flame between urban and rural India brilliantly. The protagonist of The Last Burden, Jamun, reflects the average Indian growing up in an Indian megapolis and feeling constantly that he will be more at home in New York or London than in a small place of India. This reflection does not stop at the inability to look towards the
warm home, rather it goes further. The climax lies in his (protagonist’s) surrender to the alienating faces, and an easy surrender is a mark of the anti-hero who lacks the power of positive resistance. Jamun basically cares for his mother and wants to do her bidding but knows that it is not his cup of tea and gets sucked into the vortex of modern youth’s dream of good life.

The novel, *The Last Burden* did not find a very high critical favour when it was published. The reason behind the novel was that Upamanyu Chatterjee appears to have no scruples about leading that anti-heroic protagonist and other small protagonistic characters into escapade which many thought were in doubtful taste. C. Sengupta remarks in “*The Last Burden: The Burden of Family and the Burden of Language*” that “the book deals for the most part with wasted, aimless lives and it becomes a metaphor of a monstrous ugliness” (39). It was also chided for what was called the verbosity. It was charged that the free flow of dialogues gets hampered by the inclusion of difficult words, and they sound unreal and formal. Dom Moraes in “*My Family and other Animals*” called it burden of language and Joyce with a bad hangover (29). Among the unfavourable opinions regarding the novel *The Last Burden*, one could discover the realisation missing: the realisation that the theme of this novel does not allow the novelist to have a protagonist who is a god-fearing, family-loving person, who has no emotional narratives that are complicated, and who does not cast dirty looks at a friend’s wife. The most important factor is that the anti-heroic protagonist of *The Last Burden* in his inner heart, hates himself for casting such looks. Above all, he is a torn personality, forming part of a family torn apart by conflicts and factioning. Loneliness is his essential hallmark, his inability to have a meaningful communication his chief handicap and also the source of immoral forays into things that look revolting to the reader.
In *The Last Burden* the terrain comes to the reader as the celebrated Indian family founded on the rocks of blood ties. In comparison with the institution of Indian bureaucracy, the institution of Indian family has much more substance in terms of traditional sanctity, modern value as a source of emotional warmth and subsistence, and in just being simply hoary. The choice of blood ties, which becomes as avoidable as a ‘burden’ as the theme of a novel is quite in the vein of Upamanyu Chatterjee’s artistic conception of the anti-heroic Indian world.

The novel is pictured on the story of Jamun, who represents the younger son in the family of Urmila and Shyamananda, an ageing couple, in their retirement, who can no longer depend on the filial piety of their sons. Urmila is in her death bed so Jamun is being summoned. Meanwhile, Jamun’s elder brother Burfi and his Christian wife Joyce arrive with their two children, namely Doom and Pista. Joyce is bored with her parents-in-law and the whole family awaits Urmila’s death. Under such an emotional situation hardly is there any love or tenderness.

The social realism of Chatterjee turns its focus to the issue of relationship in an ordinary middle class family, thereby exploring the state of Indian anti-heroic personality. As a social realist he is ruthless in his examination of the relationship, because his belief in the importance of relationship as the essential medium through which human beings express themselves is reflected in his creative intensity. With him one is reminded that relationship is one of the most, or rather, the most important thing in life. That means that one has to understand what love is. The personality of a human being finds it most valid expression in the way it handles personal crises and relationships. Therefore, human relationship especially within the family forms the primary bedrock of human existence.

To quote the philosopher, J. Krishnamurti is of the view “The problem is not the world, but you in relationship with another, which creates a problem; and that problem extended
becomes the world problem (“For Love and Loneliness”, 26). It is this problem of relationship within a family gone uncontrollably intractable which forms the milieu in which a growing mind, that is Jamun the anti-heroic protagonist of *The Last Burden*, shapes his development. The parental rancour and hatred do form the primary agents in the emotional development of the anti-heroic Jamun, but besides the parents, even the brother and his wife, Burfi and Joyce, are also not healthy in their relationship. They too, are a loveless couple, though not as absolutely as Shayamanand and Urmila, who live in a state left unirrigated by the elixir of love, empathy and sympathy. They also suffer the drab and dry existence of their loveless relationship. Jamun perceives in Burfi-Joyce relationship a kind of disconnect similar to the parental discord, but with a slight difference. On the surface, theirs appears to be a happy marriage, but in reality they both bear themselves idiotically. As far as their attitude to Shayamanand and Urmila is concerned, it is hellish, considering the expectations from Indian sons and daughters-in-law. Burfi, the elder son of his parents, bluntly remarks that “staying with them is screwing my marriage up” (116). The prevailing emotional structure of this family is like an arena where everyone fights everyone. The entire family ambience is of doubt, suspicion and hatred. One critic, while accentuating the emotional corrosion dominating in the family points to the choice of names of the characters of this novel, and concludes that these names are an ingredient in this attrition and corrosion. This choice of names seems to echo a dominant theme of the book, that is, the devouring nature of family relationship.

In the novel *The Last Burden* the family relationship itself appears to be a hideous anti-hero. It assumes, as it were, a palpable form of pain and emotional exploitation being inflicted by the family members upon one another. The relationship, which normally works as a background for human actions, seems to break its bounds of abstraction and
comes as a reality with its own force to make itself felt as a concrete presence. It is a
realisation which appears to permanently elude the protagonists of the novel. The result of
this permanent elusion is, as captured beautifully by a critic M. S. Hema who suggests
that the individual “…. is no longer the hero or the maker of his own story, but is the man
of the story seeking to come to terms with himself as he is catapulted by the currents of
change into which he is sucked in without his making any conscious option” (The
Postmodern Indian English Novel, 49).

But Shyamanand and his sons remain engrossed in hot exchanges of words in the
matter concerning money and property, on the will, which Urmila is supposed to have
written and on questions of what obligation children have to their parents. The main
concern of the quarrel remains on the expenses to be borne, the speculation on how much
they will get out of Urmila and what should be done with Shyamanand when Urmila
passes away. Thus amorality and self-centredness translate themselves into a situation,
very well described in the very context of the novel by Dom Moraes:

> Family life, as Chatterjee seems to see it, is an arena where all barriers are
down….Dependence and the process of destruction it holds within it are
the material of the novel. The various interlined protagonists suffer each
other. The seal of blood, the last burden, keeps each member of the family
hermetically locked within it. It compels emotion of affection or love, but
hidden under these are sensations of boredom, dislike, contempt, and even
the burden of the geriatric father to be borne, and the further burden of the
children of the house, to be brought up into the same vicious cycle. (“My
Family and other Animals”, 28)

The protagonist of The Last Burden is born into a family which is extremely hate-
filled. It is a novel about an ordinary middle class family. Shayamanand, a retired
government official and his wife Urmila share a house, built on their ‘own clod of earth’ (12) with their son Burfi and his Christian wife, Joyce. Urmila’s other son, Jamun lives in a far away town. Jamun’s disinclination to see his dying mother is linked to his past spent in the family dominated by parental discord and rancour. Jamun’s parents share little in common but they continue to live together fretting in mutual resentment and competing bitterly for the son’s allegiance. Quarreling is the central organising feature of the novel, the experience around which a great deal of its action revolves. In Shyamanand and Urmila the classic case of a husband and wife falling out but not separating is seen. “They are actuated partly by the itch to woo their brood away from each other while straining to demonstrate to it, in a thousand oblique ways, the general beastliness of the spouse” (263). The relationship between the protagonist’s parents, Urmila and Shyamanand, is corrosive to the maximum limit. Urmila seems to sum up the whole corrosive basis of such a relationship: “rancour for one another; the most guileless event milks from us, our watchful malice living together merely to thrill in unkindness, marrying, mounting and spawning because we are all afraid of being corporeally alone” (263). Amitabh Mattoo states that in an interview, Upamanyu Chatterjee has remarked about the problem relating to the central climax of the novel: “My new novel, The Last Burden is concerned not with growing up but with family ties. It takes a close look at an Indian family, the complexity of relationships and how these change as a cataclysmic event occurs” (“Magic Realism isn’t My true Stuff”, Illustrated Weekly of India, 29).

Jamun’s mother, Urmila, at the age of sixty is left with distress. While Shyamanand is left friendless, loneliness eats him up. When Urmila’s heart attack issue arises, it widens the economic grounds of her children and of her husband. At this juncture the novelist Upamanyu Chatterjee brings the real and true face of the family relationship in India. The traditional and cultural myth of family togetherness perpetuated
in India is exploded. Jamun’s long wait is agonising. And he further reflects to himself and realizes that,

one’s duty must hurl one first towards one’s blood. To hold true to one’s blood is more noble than to combat general smuts in a remote country. Hearken unto thy father that begat these and despise not thy mother when she is old. (8)

Jamun’s sense of complicity in the present condition of his mother disturbs him both mentally and emotionally. This delicate situation of mother’s illness underlines the ambivalence that lies at the bottom of all relationships within the family.

In an interview, Sagarika Ghosh suggests that, Chatterjee was as explicit as he could be regarding his intension behind this novel. He says, “I wanted to write about the suffering that family members inflict on each other and the terrible responsibility of emotional dependence, I wanted to describe the burden, I suppose of attachments” (“Testimony to Change”, Times of India, 5).

Burfi’s boozing takes him back to the occasion when drinking used to bring the father and the sons together, until on a birthday, a remark of Shyamanand about Burfi being tutored by his wife to forget his past, dissolves all geniality. Jamun truly accepts the great deal of truth in his father’s ranting against Burfi’s total submissiveness to his order and not so beautiful Christian wife Joyce, yet this distinctive reaction, according to him, is being loud and the crude statement of his father is one of abhorrence. The abhorrence could be calculated on account of the reflection of the past life of his parents characterized by the ever-complaining mother on account of her withstanding poor health striving the family with her salary, while her husband tucks away his salary in fixed deposits.
The root of the tragedy reflects in the option Shyamanand had made in life in the prosperity and happiness which contained within them the prospect of his children learning to lead him along with the native language and tradition. Burfi and Jamun had been sent to the Jesuit school where they were brought up under the influence of Western life which in turn reflected in their food, habits, language and speech.

They hobnobbed with, aped and envied chronicles who were wealthier and more Westernized than they who over the years, introduced them to hamburgers and porterhouse steaks, soufflés and blancmange kevs, blues and heavy metal, hash and coke and phrases like ‘laid back’, shift creek, ‘a piece of ass’; these friends also make the brothers, with diverse intensities, at different ticks of time, veiledly ashamed of their parents and their homes. (135)

A critic C. Sengupta in his “The Burden of Family, the Burden of Language” remarks that what makes this novel about ordinary affairs quite extraordinary is the bleakness of its vision. Chatterjee’s is a world where dawn breaks with the “tint of ashes”, and people “yawp” and “spuawk” at each other. “The bleakness of the imagery, the ugly sounding prose express not so much some abstract existential gloom as disgust at a society that is aggressive in its self-destructiveness” (55).

Jamun recalls his own scorching words to his mother:

Our house isn’t worth returning to its unhappy dead. Kuki’s or Kasthuri’s house is such a contrast. Banter, warmth, a sunniness. Her parents’ friends will be in the living room. Yours don’t even exist….They could be on another planet. You and Baba don’t even sleep or stay in the same room unless the TV’s on. God. He switches off after he’s heaved his pique out, but the sentiment that its very inmates have ousted from their house, the
warmth and light of consanguinity abides with him, like a lump, for all the
cold sweat years that he and his parents live by themselves. (136)

Shyamanand, had accomplished all his duties due to his children and wife in
giving expensive education to the children and a decent home and being loyal in all his
household, even then his virtue falls down in giving more importance to inanimate things
than to the people. But as a father he remains shrewd in his ways retaining unity of the
family bond as per the Indian culture. But above all he fails in maintaining his
relationship with his wife and sons. He is almost in the urge to lose them when he needed
them most at the moment of Urmila’s heart attack. They seem to him (Shyamananda),
brand new and alien, in jeans and T-shirts of dubious shades and articulate
a puzzling species of English, whereas Urmila and he had ripened in an
earlier, illusory genial world (in which Shyamanand and his siblings had
nested together in parsimony, balefulness and rancour). Wherein mawkish
that he is, he reckons that the bonds of family had been sturdier and
parents more revered. (108)

Again this brings about the attitude of the ambivalent culture of the existing generation
towards family and parents.

Burfi, the elder brother of Jamun was very much entangled under the fantasy of
Westernism. He was far away from all the cultural traits and duties prevalent in the Indian
society. Even taking care of the parents in their old age was to be agreed only when all
the money of his parents was to be endured to him. This again reflects the ambivalent
attitude of the present generation. Burfi states the following to his father, “You
(Shyamanand) make over your money to me (Burfi), and I’ll remain with and foster you
and Ma for the remaining of your lives, but I’ll need to be financially independent” (66).
The concept of anti-hero found in Upamanyu Chatterjee is particularly relevant to the assessment of Saul Bellow for him the anti-hero is “... the individual under a great strain labouring to maintain himself or perhaps an idea of himself; he feels the pressure of the vast public life, which may dwarf him as an individual while permitting him to be a giant in hatred and fantasy. In these circumstances he grieves, he complains, rages or laughs. All the while he is aware of his lack of power, his inadequacy as a moralist, the nauseous pressure of the mass media...and the weight of the money and organisation” (Recent American Fiction, 23).

For about one year, Urmila had to stay alone in Bhubaneshwar on account of her transfer, for the reason that her children should spend their holiday with her. Jamun recalls that his mother’s absence had almost turned their abode from a government flat into a dreary, more disheveled and soulless place like a slummy hostel. Shyamanand very rarely joined them at Bhubaneshwar.

Thus, the love of mother surpasses above all other things in the Indian society. This is the mark of deep emotional bond that ever reigns in the Indian culture among the family circle mainly between mother and children.

Truly a death made one brood, didn’t it. And if one scrutinized the matter, looked it in the eyes, and full in the face, then doubtless the value, the drift, the purport of existence was a burden likely to make one lose one’s marbles of course for that reason, if one were wise one wouldn’t reflect on the subject of the pith of death for more than a couple of seconds at a stretch. One could use Ma’s case as an illustration. What had her life been for? Why had she come to life, and why had she survived for over sixty years surely at bottom for nothing? The aspiration of her existence had for sure not been happiness, which appear to him, uncertainly, to be the one
feasible vindication for living, the single glow amongst the anguish, malevolence, rancour and rage. But Ma’s never conceded to an instant of any species of delight in her drab childhood, her toilsome youth, or her catastrophic marriage ….Yet whenever she’d been pumped, circuitously, on what she felt about these things, she steadily advanced that her life had been fruitful because after all hadn’t she fostered two good sons? (255)

Thus, Jamun realises the fact that no one could ever liberate himself from his mother. He further compromises with the reality of his mother’s demise and grows more mature. Jamun also realises that his mother had really led a life full of endurance and patience for the sake of her children and family. And her presence in the family had turned out her survival as a fruitful one, though she has not enjoyed her childhood youth, middle age or married life.

Perhaps one was ravaged, even if just for a time, only by the first death of a parent, and the second was like seeing your guest off at the end of the house-warming. May be one honestly lamented only a mother’s passing, because one’s body and soul never forgot that one was of her flesh. (253)

In the novel *The Last Burden* it is seen that Jamun’s attitude towards his father is much crueler than that towards his mother. Through a careful analysis one could discern a view of Oedipal relationship between Jamun and his mother, like Paul Morel and his mother in D.H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*. The character of Jamun is not as flat as that of Burfi, the elder brother. Despite all the confrontation with his father he sees with pain, sometimes, the sight of the father unsuccessfully trying to woo the attention of his grandson. His abortive efforts distress him, because, despite all the emotional estrangement, Shayamanand touches him somewhere as his father. This makes that protagonistic personality of Jamun interestingly enriched. But his emotional bonding to
his mother is unmistakable, and this can be described, in the words of the critic Harry Haseltine, as “the most palpably important relationship” (*The Uncertain Self*, 147) in the novel. *The Last Burden* parallels Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers* and also Australian novelist and short story writer Hal Porter’s *The Watcher on the Cast Iron Balcony*. The common factor among Chatterjee, Lawrence and Porter is the importance of relationship recorded between son and mother. Another parallel which intensifies ‘the important relationship’ is the autobiographical element in these novels. *The Watcher on the Cast Iron Balcony* records Porter’s account of his mother’s death and funeral which can be compared with Paul Morel’s tearing grief which is the climax of *Sons and Lovers*. Coincidentally, Chatterjee’s mother died while he was writing *The Last Burden*. There seems to be an echo of his grief in Jamun’s predicament.

Chatterjee stresses the Oedipal relationship between the protagonist and his mother, and suggests that he tugs at his bondage and thinks ‘that at her death he probably …tastes deliverance’ (111). Jamun’s emotional ‘bondage’ to his mother makes it impossible for him enter into a responsible and independent life of relationships of his own. He does not marry, for in marriage he senses a certain betrayal of his parents. His relationships with women are all perfunctory, for he is incapable of relating to any one in a manner that would take him beyond himself. The unattached relationship with Kasturi does not, quite naturally considering his anti-heroic amorality regarding sexual norms, set any inhibitions on him regarding tumbling with his maidservant Kasibai and her asinine son. The arrangement with Kasibai is perfect as it makes no demands on him emotionally. His urbanity at times makes him disgusted by the boorishness of Kasibai and her son; and he tries haphazardly to educate them for his own peace of mind. But he does not make any conspicuous progress principally because he is not interested in them as fellow creatures. The sense of guilt, however, pursues him constantly.
But in contrary to Jamun, Burfi always wanted the fantasies of the Western culture, which had the influences of his Jesuit school cronies who had mothers who puffed long cigarettes and had their hair tinted, while their fathers went to clubs. It was a world away from spirituality, so above all his main concern remained in getting the best from the family with least expense from his side. As his concerns are limited, his desire to chart out an identity out of his own cultural and traditional values was the equation within himself. His punctiliousness about doing things in style is extended even to the ritual moment of the immersion of his mother’s ashes when he desires that some Sanskrit verses be mouthed to make it ceremonious. Burfi moreover remained devoid of any sensitivity to a native and personal, emotional and spiritual identity. This insensitivity and exposure to Western culture remains the backbone for his indifferent views towards parents and life.

According to George Lamming in “The Pleasures of Exile”,

The exile is a universal figure....We are made to feel a sense of exile by our inadequacy and our irrelevance of function in a society whose past we can’t alter, and whose future is always beyond us. Idleness can easily guide us into accepting this as a condition. Sooner or later, in silence or with rhetoric we sign a contract whose epitaph reads: To be an exile is to be alive. (35)

While Jamun had remained sensitive to human situation he is placed in where bonds of love fill him with a sense of guilt. Jamun is more comfortable with his oppressed feeling and suffering with which his natural tendency is to fight. His father’s illness and loneliness make Jamun reflect and be more concerned about his father who had not been entertained in the least.

It is a significant fact that The Last Burden is not like English, August: An Indian Story, a novel where one person suffers and experiences more than other characters. The
suffering and mutual cruelty are experienced by almost one and all. It can be noticed that
all the characters that belong to the family of the suffering father, Shymanand, suffer in
equal measure. Sometimes one has the apprehensive feeling that the burden consists not
in attachment but in the unreal world created by novelist. One is enticed to think that the
novelist has overdone the confused and often desolated relationship within an Indian
family, even though the novel belonged to the nineties of the last century. A tradition-
bound Indian reaction might run along the line. The novelist has articulately depicted the
characters wallowing in self-destructive futility, and so appears cynical and unnecessarily
sweeping in his portrayal of the sanctified institution of Indian family. One of the
reviewers Rashmee Ahamed has called “the residue of decay, the crud companionship
gone sour” (“Review of The Last Burden” Time of India, 7).

At the centre of the novel The Last Burden is an Indian family that is peopled with
middle class human beings deeply despairing, cynical, lacking in warmth, violent and
divided, but not without their small ransom acts that at once are uplifting but tragic. The
destructive relationship between the father and the mother, between the mother and the
two sons, between the father and the sons and the elder son’s wife, and finally, between
the elder son and wife, point unmistakably to the existence of a family that is pitted
against itself. It seems that the anti-heroic aspect has taken the shape of an Indian family
for whose identity the adjectives ‘loveless’ and ‘violent’ appear to be the only markers.
The only saving factor is a glimmer of maturity that dawns upon Jamun towards the end
of the book. Lovelessness is the enveloping presence in the entire spread of the novel. For
a reader who follows the lives of Shyamanand and Urmila (significantly without
surname) and their two sons, Pista and Doom, set in a city by the sea (significantly again
without a name), it becomes a painful but necessary invasion into a world that is
perceptibly real. Thus it is characteristic of the social realism of Upamanyu Chatterjee
that he creates a fictional universe that refuses not to seem factual. He reminds us throughout his work as a perceptive critic Wilbur Scott “Five Approaches to Literary Criticism” has remarked, “Art is not created in a vaccum, it is the work not simply of a person, but of an author fixed in time and space, answering to a community of which he is an important because articulate part” (124).

Jamun’s mother’s death is an apparent release, yet it reinforces in him the inescapable tangle of life. Jamun cannot break himself from the bound duty of looking after his father, as Burfi and Joyce escape from the task of caring for the old man. But by securing the help of rustic, a moral yet dependable Kasibai (servant), Jamun succeeds in making all human relationships manageable.