5.1. *English, August: An Indian Story* [1988]

During the 1980s, Indian Fiction in English witnessed a new crown of writers who, equipped with a new idiom, who have changed tone, tenor and content of Indian English Literature. Among these new voices, Upamanyu Chatterjee is one.

*English August: An Indian Story* [*EAAIS*] is one of the powerful and emerging voices amongst India's Post-Colonial Literary Stalwarts. It was published in 1888. Upamanyu Chatterjee tells his stories about the Post-Colonial Bureaucracy, Development, Politics and Political Leaders, Education, Language and so on through various characters in the drama of an Indian situation. Through the novel, he portrays some serious issues that revolve around the ‘urban educated youth’ and pictures a class of ‘Westernized People’ who are otherwise unnoticed in regional and English Fictional Work. Dev Benegal made *English, August: An Indian Story* into a film in 1994. Geeta Doctor appreciates the novel for, “The accumulation of details that produce a powerful image of Madna and the oppression of a way of functioning that passes for life in an I.A.S.” [19].

The very title of Upamanyu Chatterjee’s novel *English August: An Indian Story* lays great emphasis on the story part of it at the outset. And it is ‘Indian.’ This is a story about an Indian by an Indian, which might have otherwise been *Indian Agastya: An English Story*. The ironic connotations of the title suggest that though the English have left, yet English still enjoys its Augustan day in India, as the story may be Indian but it is in English. Moreover, the Raj Syndrome still haunts the Indians-particularly the young generation, who find August to be more convenient than Agastya.

Chatterjee's story centers around a recent college graduate named Agastya Sen. Known to his friends as August and to his family as Ogu, Agastya lives the dissolute, carefree life of the privileged in
Delhi, his father being the Governor of Bengal. Unfortunately, his mother, a Catholic from Goa, died from meningitis when Agastya was just three years old, so he was raised largely by aunts. His friends go to Yale and Harvard. He himself has secured a position in the most prestigious and exclusive of Indian government agencies, the IAS.

Having successfully achieved a high score on the national examinations for government service, however, August consents to a position in the Indian Administrative Service and a posting to a distant country town named Madna, famed for being the hottest small town in India. Once there, he begins a training period. Acquiring a hybrid Western/Indian lifestyle he feels lonely in this place. Agastya himself smokes a lot of pot and drinks a lot of beer, finds ingenious excuses to shirk work, loses himself in sexual fantasies about his boss’s wife, and makes caustic asides to co-workers and friends. And yet he is as impatient with his own restlessness as he is with anything else. His major goal in life is simply to be happy, to live contentedly and not be bothered. He arrives at work at 11:00 in the morning and works until lunch, and then repairs to his private room for the rest of the afternoon, getting stoned, listening to music, reading some occasional Marcus Aurelius, and sleeping. Along the way, he develops friendships with an iconoclastic editorial cartoonist named Sethe, a good-hearted alcoholic government worker named Shankar, and Madna's police chief, Kumar. there is also August's cook, Vasant, and Dhruvo and Agastya’s hilariously sarcastic uncle Pultukaku, and Mohan Gandhi with his wife Rohini, and the strange story of John Avery and his Indian wife, Sita, who set out to find the place where Avery's grandfather was devoured by a lion a half century earlier.

When he finally moves into a position of modest responsibility as a Block Development Officer in the even smaller and more backward village of Jompanna, August surprises himself [and us] by unexpectedly, and modestly heroically, solving the village’s water shortage problem. Chatterjee's is a tale of India's multiple worlds, from
the West itself [represented by England and America], the cosmopolitan strivers of the big cities, the ineffectual but lifetime-employed government workers, and the countless millions of Indians living in the rural countryside. Chatterjee reminds us constantly of India's many languages, of the difficulty that the people of one nation can have in understanding one another's lives as well as their speech. Place of English and education system and place of women these are the things portrayed vividly. Agastya is restless, and he does consider escape from Madna and a career in the IAS. He flees, briefly, back to the big city, and considers taking a job in publishing. But he does return to stick it out in Madna.

The novelist’s position on the contemporary issues is voiced through many characters. His views are scattered throughout the novel written against the obscurity, which these institutions enjoy in our country. Along with the principal story of the protagonist [Agastya Sen] the stories of Tamse, the government artist, Mohan Gandhi, Dr. Darshan Multani, Shankar-the engineer, Baba Ramanna and Richard Avery dovetail in the novel. There are also shadowy female figures of Renu and Neera.

Upamanyu Chatterjee’s *English, August: An Indian Story* is told in the third person narrative, which lends greater objectivity to the narrative and allows various characters to participate in it. The novelist shuffles from direct to indirect narration at his will and adds his comments on the reported remark of a character in the first person. The opening paragraphs of unnamed and unnumbered chapters or sections of the novel [in his usual throw-away manner] serve the purpose of stage setting, and in most cases they are written in that fashion. The protagonist’s “desultory diary,” [EAAIS 69], which he maintained like his intellectual mentor Marcus Aurelius and the undated letters, are part of his narrative technique and reveal parts of the personality of his characters who are partially or absolutely off staged. Chatterjee’s narrative strategy is sophisticated in its irony, comical and farcical
comedy. However, the novel out rightly rejects all the myths about India.

Agastya Sen, is a 24 year-old man of Bengali-Goan parentage. He is an IAS officer posted in Madna. August joins the IAS because: [a] his dad was an IAS officer; [b] he’s not sure what he wants to do and [c] has some vague notions about helping India. However, he gets disillusioned in Madna - about the bureaucracy, the sycophancy, the corruption, the feudal attitude of the IAS officers and life in general - and is amazed at how the big Indian machine continues to move forward despite all these spanners in its works.

He is named after Agastya, which is transformed into August by his anglophile friends because August is more convenient than Agastya. His parents call him as ‘Ogu.’ Agastya has, it seems, approved of his Anglicized name in the initial stages till he is in Madna where he is put to considerable pain in explaining the meaning of his name, which amused some and baffled many. When an engineer, the first person whom he meets on his way to Madna, asks him irritably, “what kind of name is Agastya?” he says:

He’s a saint of the forest in the Ramayana, very ascetic. He gives Ram a bow and arrow. He’s there in Mahabharata too. He crosses the Vindhyas and stops them from growing. [EAAIS 4]

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. Soma type, god quality scotch, bottled for twelve years. [ibid. 28]

When, Srivastava, The Collector of Madna questions, “So? Agastya, what kind of name is Agastyabhai?” he is so fed up with such
questions that he wanted to say cynically and sacrilegiously, “Agastya’ is Sanskrit . . . for one who shits only one turd every morning.” [ibid. 15] He tells the Collector’s wife sneeringly, “It’s Sanskrit for one who turns the flush just before he starts pissing, and then tries to finish pissing before the water disappears.” [ibid. 54] To those whom the names matter much it is a ‘good,’ ‘strange’ and ‘unusual’ name. Much later some meaning is extracted through etymological dissection:

Agam is mountain. Agastya could be agam plus asyati, one who pushes a mountain. Or agam plus sthayayati, one who stops a mountain. We often have this ambiguity, an uncertainty about our names, their origins. It should also be linked to the Latin augeus which means to advance. That is appropriate since the sage Agastya was also the wanderer who pined for Benares. [EAAIS 227]

Here is the issue of tradition and modernity that he do not want to continue with his traditional name. Agastya Sen is a westernized Indian whose thoughts are dominated by women, Literature and soft drugs. He belongs to the new generation termed “Cola generation,” [ibid. 47] “the generation that doesn’t oil its hair,” [ibid. 47] the “generation of apes.” [ibid. 28] and the generation that would love to “get AIDS because; it is rampant in America.” [ibid. 76] “You are an absurd combination,” says Agastya’s uncle, “a boarding-school-English-literature education and obscure name from Hindu myth.” [ibid. 129]. As a Modern and secular, Agastya hasn't much respect for tradition or religion. [At a temple, he and a friend share a picnic of beer and beef and marijuana.]

The novel opens with an informal conversation between Agastya, who is to leave for Madna for his probationary period as an I.A.S. officer, and Dhruvo, Agastya’s friend who has been back from Yale University after his higher studies. Agastya’s journey poses many a question; Dhruvo, for example, says, “What you do for sex and marijuana in Madna?” [EAAIS 3]. Agastya finds himself trapped in a strangulating situation like “the fallen Adam” [ibid. 5] in this place
blazing under scorching heat aggravated by mosquito menace. He feels a strange sense of desolation, alienation and frustration, for he thinks he is simply wasting his time.

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 workings of his job and the place. He feels “emptier than usual” [EAAIS 131]. 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 you don’t, think concretely of what you want to do instead, and change. [ibid. 94-95]

However Agastya feels himself as “a dot in this hinterland” [ibid. 5] 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 into 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. [ibid. 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 Indian 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 that 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. [EAAIS 149]

Therefore, it is the cultural dislocation that the protagonist is grown in cosmopolitan city where he is shaped with western life style and his career has brought him in Madna, which is not the privileged place. Agastya’s crisis for identity starts right from the beginning when on the train to Madna; another passenger had rudely interrogated him: “Agastya? What kind of name is Agastya? ...You are IAS? You don’t look like an IAS officer…..you don’t even look Bengali.” [ibid. 9]

Agastya suffers from lambent dullness and boredom. He considers himself as one “with no special attitude for anything,” [ibid. 3] and thinks, “I should have been a photographer, or a maker of ad films something like that, shallow and urban.” [ibid. 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.

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 challenges or responsibility or anything; all I want is to be happy,” he observes [ibid. 148]. His uncle is right in his own way when he calls it flippancy and says, “You are interested in nothing and you think that is a virtue” [ibid. 161]. He is unable to cope with the intricacies of administering in a place.
These all shows that; he is being caught into duality of choosing right career option and is misplaced. Moreover, is struggling to prove owns identity in an ever changing world. 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. [EAAIS 92]

Agastya goes for ‘soft options’ like reading. 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 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 guesthouse cook, and visiting various offices to learn intricacies of bureaucracy. In such a smothering atmosphere life becomes a bleak business with a tantalizing, painfully elusive, definite but clichéd goal. Moreover, he does not see a way out of his uneasiness and suffocation. In this way, Samar’s uneasiness and suffocation designates intense loneliness in his life.

Agastya does not relish working in Madna, as Srivastava, Kumar and others do. His uneasiness is increased by his close observation of Indian bureaucracy, which he thinks is incapable of delivering desired goals. In spite of his prerogative as an I.A. S. officer he could not bring about the change in the bureaucratic culture, though he bridges the existing hiatus to a considerable extent between the agents of the administration and the tribals of Chipanthi village through his visit to this drought-hit area where the tribals risk the lives of their children for a pail of mud. He could neither obviate his personal abyss nor could find any suitable solution to the problems that surrounded
him. It made him increasingly aware of his perplexing predicament. Neera’s letter adds to his disenchantment and he, like Dhruvo’s American, takes “a year off after college to discover himself” [EAAIS 288].

Agastya’s action and conduct stand out in almost direct contrast to those of his mythical counterpart and the various implications of his name. He is neither of the forest, for he loves city life, nor does he find a Ram to give him bow and an arrow. He enters the dark Vindhyas of bureaucracy but is incapable of stopping them from growing. He is not able to push the mountain of inefficiency, corruption, artificiality and snobbery even by an inch. He does not wander willingly but is compelled to do so. He pines not for Benares but for Delhi. Conduct has some ‘strange’ and ‘unusual’ tinge throughout which stands on its own ground of justification. He seems to be a ‘vulgar parody’ of Agastya of antiquity. No one except his father to some extent tries to understand what lies behind the crust of his seemingly ‘unheroic’ action. His aunts even tried to relate his behavior “to the original sin, the marriage of a Bengali Hindu to a Goan Catholic” [ibid. 288]. His irreverence emanates from his angst against social, political and moral institutions and the dispensers of this contaminated culture.

Agastya knows that the modern media weaves stories for the one who is behind. The novelist has projected the protagonist’s penchant for cooking up stories. Agastya fabricates stories so dexterously that it amounts to telling lies and there is almost no room left between ‘real’ and ‘unreal.’ At times he courts embarrassing situations for himself by trumping up different versions of the same aspect to the same person. He cooks stories even about his marital status. On the very first day when questioned in the Collectorate office he says about his [non-existent] wife: “She’s in England. She’s English, anyway, but she’s gone there for a cancer operation. She has cancer of the breast” [ibid. 13]. Later on during his training he told the District Inspector of Land Records that “his wife was a Norwegian
Muslim” [ibid. 13]. He made another story about his parents who were said to be in Antarctica as members of the first Indian expedition. His mother is said to have a Ph.D. in Oceanography from the Sorbonne. [EAAIS 14] He tells Menon that he had been in Cambridge for education. [ibid. 15] When, Mr. Kumar asks him; “When are you getting married, Sen?” He replies, “Not for a while.” The immediate comments of the narrator are noteworthy: “he had forgotten which story he had fabricated for Kumar.” [ibid 139]

Agastya fabricates stories either to avoid being grilled on certain delicate subjects, to exteriorize his fantasies, or to nonplus the questioners who keep nagging him with questions on certain aspects. He understands that he is telling lies but the feeling of remorse flees after some time. The novelist, however, leaves all the options open for the reader to judge the fabricator, the stories and the motive on merit. It is more out of his bewilderment and confusion that Agastya acts in the manner most unsuitable to him. The real cause as to why he does all this almost unconsciously or casually may be found in his psychology which, appears to have been dented due to overexposure in an entirely new world, for which the new generation could not prepare itself as, its preceding generation did, and the old generation could not understand the new generation with absolutely, different goals and ideals for itself.

Agastya deconstructs Tamse’s [the government artist] painting depicting “a sunset, and water . . . a boat, a boatman in a Japanese conical hat, on the shore two trees, like giant mushrooms” [EAAIS 8] with an inscription. Agastya tries to visualize the artist from his art through the painting and the inscription without much success. He appreciates Tamse’s candid admission of the fact that he was missing his old life and wife. He further infers: “He was sentimental too; otherwise he would not have donated the painting. Despite the nullity of talent, it was still an attempt to share a mood and an experience” [ibid. 9].
Agastya ‘makes up’ the story of Tamse [which is frequently punctuated by ‘perhaps’] but its reliability is not imposed on the reader. Other characters, too, have their stories about Tamse and the novelist has spared sufficient space to tally various versions of Tamse’s story and allow the reader not to rely on any of these versions—rather use these versions as raw material and with his own emplotting strategies make up his own story of Tamse. To Kumar, for example, Tamse “was here some time ago, he’s been posted in Madna two or three times he’s very enthusiastic and untalented, he paints also, also very badly” [ibid. 23]. A little later in the novel he further refers to Tamse as “a bastard of an executive engineer.” [ibid. 130] His assessment of Tamse, however, reflects more light on the properties of his own personality and profession rather than those of Tamse.

Shankar also forwards his contemptuous story of tamse whom he regard as ‘that joker of an artist’ and ‘a buffoon’ [ibid. 31]. Whatsoever may be the cause and worth of Shankar’s vituperative remarks against tamse, in all certainty he adds one more category to the hierarchy of the artist. The novelties brackets various stories about tamse with the protagonist’s ambivalent attitude towards him. The change in his attitude is reflected in these observations of the narrator:

He had liked this tamse of 1962, but how ridiculous the later tamse had become, the government artist, who created status and rest house for people whose idea of art could be found in the drains. Tamse had to learn, he thought, that to be lonely was not enough. [ibid. 273-74]

The story of Govind Sathe, a cartoonist [as he himself says], “a yellow journalist,” [ibid. 42] as Kumar designates him, serves a striking contrast to the protagonist’s. ‘Visibility’ is a problem for Agastya and a quest for Sathe, who knows how difficult it is for one to make oneself visible. He was worried about being invisible in Bombay where he might have lost himself. On the country, Agastya wants to escape notice which he as an I.A.S officer in a small town like Madna
attracts. He wishes to go back to Delhi and get lost. Sathe tells his own story beginning with his father’s business as a forest contractor and his brother’s course in hotel management. When Agastya puts the question, “then what are you doing in Madna?” he relies succinctly, “I like the place” [ibid. 43] and then turns it around, “with a question like that you really revel yourself, Mr. Sen your past, your bewilderment and boredom. Aren’t you surprised at seeing me in Madna; I wear Levi’s and read *yes minister*?” [ibid. 44] The real answer to Agastya’s question is suspended till almost the end of the novel where Sathe points out:

> On the first day, in Kumar’s office, you asked me what I was doing in Madna. Where you’ve grown up it is different. Isn’t it, everyone pronounces “epitome” correctly and doesn’t use “of” after “compromise,” and behaves as though these things matter. But Madna is home for me, August; in Bombay I felt lost. my best years, my past, is here, bitter sweet because it is gone. Whatever you choose to do, you will regret everything or regret nothing. [*EAAIS* 285]

There is striking resemblance between Sathe and Agastya in one respect, for neither of them opts for the profession seemingly imposed on them by their parents.

In sharp contrast to Agastya’s and in a way, to Sathe stands the story of his friend Dhruvo, who despite his job in new Delhi and finding civil services more lucrative, starts preparing for examination. Agastya writes to him on his last day in Madna. “You must be dying while studying for the civil Services exam. Meanwhile, I’ve become your American, taking a year off after college to discover himself” [*EAAIS* 288]. This is meant that in order to get through Civil service Exams one has to study hard and patiently wait for the outcome.

In the process Madna becomes a microcosm of India-and in a way, of the completely Indian sub-continent, which finds itself trapped in a metaphor of confusing disenchantment and disaffections towards
many of these institutions. Madna of changed as it went through various phases. The Madna of past is evoked through various references to it while the novelist deals with Madna as it is today. The present town “crawls over the ruins of the 18th century fort of the obscure tribal king who had given Madna its name,” [EAAIS 47] and has been bypassed by all that have made history and news, remaining “impervious to the Moughals and 1857 and Bande Mataram and the Mid Century travails of the mega-politan India.” [ibid. 45-46] Then, the Madna of the colonial period is sketched through the story of Richard Avery, the Collector of Madna [1917-23], who liked and loved the place. In the Madna of the post-colonial period the people are allowed to starve and die of thirst. The officials exploit them physically and financially and expose them to hazards. The Forest Contractor indulges in “bribing the Forest officials, underpaying the tribals, beating others like him to a timber contract” [ibid. 284]. Therefore, it is not surprising that the naxalites have occupied the vacuum. The politicians are equally responsible for this bad state of undeveloped parts of the country like Madna and Jompanna. The novelist says that “for a politician, the mind and stomach, they’re more or less the same” [ibid. 191]. Even the wanton slogans of development have not yet reached these interior parts:

Development is an as major a leitmotif in the Indian story as are the goulash of cultures, and the other legacies of a long and complex history, but development would never be fashionable or glamorous in Jompanna. Jompanna was an Indian oblivion; life for most was slow and unheroic there. No First Page politician had ever gone there and the visits of those who had, had been quinquennial, to make the promises and get the votes . . . . The superficies of development were visible elsewhere–in skyline of a thermal power station, in the dead saplings edging a road, but here it seemed a mere word in a government file. To Agastya, many months ago, Madna had been a slice of the country hitherto unexperienced – but Jompanna was to be transcendental. [249-50]
As Bajaj, District Development Officer, says, “economics and politics” are responsible for this “skewed development.” Consequently, there has not been any substantial change in the plight of the tribals: “They’ve never been touched by the Indian mainstream. What do the tribals have to show for these decades of Independence since 1947? Just a few photographs with Nehru” [ibid. 241]. For the tribals of Jompanna, however, Madna’s culture is the mainstream.

The houses in Madna are “sad imitation of the big city” [ibid. 46]. While the old generation pines for the English mainstream, the new generation of Agastya, Dhruvo, Renu, Neera and Mandi Bhatia long for American mainstream. On the contrary, we find little creatures of Chimpanti, Jompanna and Goparak unconscious of the very idea of mainstream. Along with the railway, postal system, the clubs, the sports and the English language Indian bureaucracy has also survived in Madna. The structure of Indian Administrative Service remains more or less the same, though the nationality and the integrity of bureaucrats have profoundly changed. In this way, the Post-colonial development in Madna has remained underdeveloped due to corruption in politics and Tribal Community has always remained far from the mainstream of progress.

The world of bureaucracy as depicted in the novel is vertically compartmentalized as I.A.S., I.P.S. D.C. [Direct Recruit], promote, and so on as the various blocks of this hierarchy. The I.A.S. hogs the limelight at the top of this hierarchy, “the best possible in the Indian context,” [EAAIS 51] “like a king in ancient India . . . . walking incognito among his subjects” [ibid. 111], which incites sharp reactions from subordinates and colleagues out of professional rivalry, as is evident from Kumar’s statement: “And your senior I.A.S. bastards swell up because of the power they fool around with” [ibid. 39]. However, Srivastava, himself an I.A.S., holds that “if the country is moving, it is because of us only.” [ibid. 58]
The Indian bureaucracy behaves like crippled issues of colonial culture steeped in artificiality, snobbery, inefficiency, corruption, "interference, ingratitude, insolence, disloyalty, ill will and 'selfishness" [ibid. 121]. The post-colonial bureaucracy, "another complex and unwieldy bequest of the Raj" [ibid. 10], has undergone some change, which the novelist sums up:

But Indianization [of a method of administration, or of 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 difficult, more difficult job. He is as human as fallible, but now others can tell him so, even though he still exhibits the old accoutrements [but now Indianized] of importance – the flashing light on the roof of the Car, the passes for the first row at the sitar recital. [ibid. 10]

It proves that Indian Bureaucracy still behaves with the issues of colonial culture steeped in artificiality, snobbery, inefficiency, corruption, interference, ingratitude, insolence, disloyalty, ill will and selfishness, except this new breed of the officers has to mix with the people in the post-colonial set-up. At least in theory and in wordless social understanding they are supposed to be the servants of the people not their masters. Kumar outlines this change:

. . . The collector and the S.P. of a district are not uppity and high-handed, but like meeting them. This is India, bhai, an independent country, and not the Raj; we are servants of the people. [ibid. 23]

Chatterjee’s protagonist does not relish this state of corruption, exploitation, indifference and snobbery, which aggravates his problems in Madna and makes him develop a strong aversion for this much-coveted job. He tries to escape this crass culture as much as possible. In his insistent quest on uncompromising authenticity he sneers at Srivastava and Kumar and strips them off the artificial halo. By stealing Srivastava’s keys he tries to take “an insane revenge but
fitting” [ibid. 216]. The protagonist feels so ‘impotent with rage’ at his inability either in accommodating himself in accordance with the mores of his new job or in changing the administrative system for better.

The novel portrays August’s symbolic revenge against the corrupt administration and society and the old generation which, instead of understanding him and his angst, tried to impose its terms on him. The novelist himself told Indu Saraiya’s in an interview:

The whole structure of the Civil Service is its administration, but it part of something larger, and it has nothing to offer. We are just a bunch of completely ordinary English speaking Indians. When I say that, it sounds pompous; what I mean is, no one is interested in your generation angst. [*EAAIS* 4]

The novelist has dealt at length with the problem of education, and the place of the English language. In a country like ours one finds it difficult to communicate even after having three languages at one’s disposal whereas in Europe one “could be master of Europe” with three languages, observes a character in the novel. [ibid. 48] Language, however, cannot be separated from ideology and culture. English has been associated with the colonial culture of the rulers, and whosoever rules or wishes to do so must speak it. The Indian psyche is so much beholden to it that all – particularly the young generation – wish to be ‘the English type.’ Kumar says: “Any Indian who speaks any Indian English is also hinted at in one of the opening conversations between Agastya and Dhruvo:

Amazing mix, the English we speak. Hazar fucked. Urdu and American . . . . I am sure nowhere else could language be mixed and spoken with such ease. . . . And or accents are Indian, but we prefer August to Agastya. When I say our accents, I, of course, exclude you which is unique with fucked mongrelness. [*EAAIS* 1]
The observation does not lack in validity. The use of language is closely linked with multiple cultures of India, about which the novelist comments through Sathe:

I wanted to suggest an Indian writer about India, after having spent many years abroad, or living there. There is hundreds of them—well, if not hundred, at least twenty-five. I find these people absurd, full with one mixed up culture and writing about another, what kind of audience are they aiming at. That’s why India is just not real, a place of fantasy, or of confused metaphysics, a subcontinent of goons. All their Indians are caricatures. Why is that? Because there really are no universal stories, because each language is an entire culture. [ibid. 47-48]

Chatterjee have tried to demonstrate that, on the contrary, the Indian ‘tang’ is not a pure essence but the masala mix of a culture that has always been able to appropriate influences from outside the subcontinent. From this point of view, English is implicated in the polyphony of Indian languages, its colonial authority relativized by entering into the complexity which it describes. Yet translations between the languages that participate in this polyphony are not likely to be an easy process of matching like to like. Hierarchies exists that structure the relationship between India’s languages.

English Education, Standard, and System of Education are other crucial issues, which have merited the attention of various characters in the novel. In the opening part of the novel Dhruvo compares education in India with what he saw at Yale:

In Yale a Ph.D. wasn’t a joke. It meant something . . . . Students thought before they enrolled. But here in Delhi, all over India . . . education is biding time, a meaningless accumulation of degrees, B.A., M.A., then an M.Phil. While you join the millions in trying your luck at the Civil Services exam. So many people every year seem to find government service so interesting. . . . I wonder how many people think where their education is leading them. [EAAIS 3]
Dhruvo may be exaggerating because of his American mania. Renu, Dhruvo’s friend, who too is in Illinois doing her Ph.D., castigates that system in her letter “because academically this place ‘sucks’, and promises that “Some other time I’ll write you a bright bitchy letter about the kind of absurdities one hears at lectures here.” [ibid. 156] But all is not wrong with what Dhruvo says. Agastya himself sees the rottenness of Indian education at the time of the interview of candidates for the post of teacher: The candidates who could not answer, “What is twenty percent of eighty?” and “Who is called the Father of the Nation?” are finally selected to teach their teenage victims. [ibid. 86-87]

In higher education, the scenario is not much different, as is proved by the appointment of Mrs Srivastava as lecturer in the local college, which is not due to her academic excellence over others but because she is the wife of the Collector. Agastya’s Head of the Department, Dr. Upadhyaya, was dissatisfied with his own job and the educational situation, for “I used to teach Macbeth to my M.A. English classes in Hindi, English in India is burlesque” [ibid. 24]. His uncle, on the contrary, does not see any point in studying the English authors in India: “Chaucer and Swift, what are you going to do with these irrelevancies? Your father doesn’t seem to think that your education should teach the life around you?” [ibid. 59] Even Srivastava has something to say on this subject and he tries to hide his weakness in English through his own philosophy of English:

A useless subject, unless it helps you to master the language, which in most cases it doesn’t . . . The English we speak is not the English we read in English books . . . . 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 ideas across. [ibid. 59]

He regards English as “an unavoidable left over” and adds:
That a young man in Azamganj should find it essential to study something as unnecessary as Hamlet, that is absurd, no, but also inevitable, and just as inevitably, if we behave ourselves in three generations it will fade. [ibid. 60]

English, says Dhruvo, is the “language of the blood-sucking imperialists, they made our hearts weep, and crippled us from appreciating our glorious heritage” [EAAIS 159]. However, English language and literature remain a growth industry. People are fascinated by English and consider it “A very fine subject, Keats and Tennyson, very good-for girls especially,” for it gives “a distinct advantage in the marriage market.” [ibid. 166] English flourishes in various places in India and even books are being written on English authors, without much justification. Tonic, a relative of Agastya who is in publishing business, remarks:

Dr. Prem Krishen of Meerut University has written a book on E.M. Forster, India’s darling English-most of us seem to be grateful that he wrote that novel about India. Dr. Prem Krishen holds a Ph.D. on Jane Austen from Meerut? Or Macbeth in Ulhasnagar, and Wordsworth in Azamganj- no nothing, do go on.

We’re publishing Prem Krishen because he’ll fetch us lots of money. His book is entirely in a question and answer form. Students lap that up . . . . Why is some Jat teenager in Meerut reading Jane Austen? Why does a place like Meerut have a course in English at all? Only because the Prem Krishens of the country need a place where they can spend the money they waste on running the department usefully elsewhere. [ibid 170]

It becomes evident that the young generation has started questioning and rejecting every colonial left over and the question ultimately props up: “What is English doing in India?” Ironically the question is asked in English. And “since when has our education been useful?” asks Dhruvo [ibid. 159]. Precisely speaking, when has our education been imparted usefully or managed properly? The case of
Uttarkashi where Mohandas taught for two years in a horrible college before taking up his present assignment is illustrative of it:

The college was supposed to be post-graduate level but the labs were not even worth intermediate. Everything is broken or stolen. There were two goondas claiming to be Principal, each had younger goondas as bodyguards. I used to wonder which of them was drawing the principal’s salary. When they met in the corridor they used to curse each other quite colourfully and most students would rush out of class to hear them. Even I learnt a few new curses by listening to them. . . . Actually, to be fair to Uttarkashi, the college wasn’t worse than many other colleges elsewhere. For instance, it could easily be mistaken for a college in Alwar. [EAAJS 106]

It tells us about the state of our Higher Education and how much, it is useful for us from the life’s point of view.

Along with the shadowy female figures of Renu and Neera there are in the crowd of characters a few other faceless female faces like Mrs Srivastava, Rohini, Sita and a host of other ladies whose clutter and chatter die out like that of plates and spoons along with the party. They are content to play the second fiddle to their husbands. Geeta Doctor makes a valid point when she says; “Obviously Chatterjee does not feel at ease with women characters as yet. He still seems to see them as; August does, purely as objects of lust” [ibid. 19].

However, Renu and Neera emerge as offshoots of an era of post-modernity characterized by confusion, nihilism, scepticism verging on cynicism, incoherence, irrational and disbelief. They combine all the three stages of modernity--loss of faith in it, state of contrition, and cynicism or going gaga. Dhruvo, in one of his letters, diagnoses a streak of these symptoms. He writes to Agastya about Renu:
She said that was the only way to break our relationship, some first World stance she’s adopted before she’s even got there – ‘independence’ and ‘discovery of self,’ she even used these phrases before she left. Beneath her tears she seemed to half enjoy everything. Quite probable that creating a mess made her feels mature and adult. Look, everybody, please, I’m breaking a relationship, so I’m adult, aren’t I? It’s not the same as eating an ‘ice-cream,’ is it? Her behaviour has made me feel like a child molester. [EAAIS 118]

Renu, as Dhruvo recreates her in his letter, has contracted American cultural virus and in this state of transition she seems to have been wrenched by confusion. She confesses in the rather lengthy and naked letter that she feels ‘wary and strained’ and her face becomes. ‘Blank, bored and closed’ [ibid. 156]. She feels her ‘American friends’ warmth like ‘a terrific obligation and a responsibility’ [ibid.].

This spirit touches its acme in the letter on Neera recording her feelings at the loss of her virginity, [ibid. 286-87] that expresses her angst and symbolic revenge of the natural and biological forces against customs, creeds, conventions and taboos so unnaturally imposed against them. Chatterjee would unleash fresher whiff of air upon Indian fiction if he develops these shadowy caricatures into full characters on the lines drawn by him for himself.

It is not difficult to locate the novel in the post-modernistic Meta-fictional literary tradition. The parodic, self-parodic, mode and intent are embedded in the textual structure of the novel. “Parody,” says Linda Hutcheson

Is a typical post-modern paradoxical form because it uses and abuses the text and conventions of the tradition. It also contests both the authority of the tradition and the claims of art to originality. [EAAIS 123]

Parody is evident even in the nomenclature of certain characters. For example, the protagonist’s mythical counterpart was
born in an “abnormal” or “unnatural” manner and Agastya of the novel also is an “unnatural” progeny, as the traditionalists in the novel think, for he was born of a Goanese mother and a Bengali father. We also come across scandalous belittling of the mythical and historical characters like Agastya and Mahatma Gandhi through their parodied counterparts placed in modern fictional context. The author develops parodic situation in the novel in Mohan Gandhi’s case, which may have just been coincidental Mohan Gandhi takes his name after the one whom young generation has started forgetting, as is clear from Agastya’s ruminations, when the name of the person being introduced to him turns out to be Mohandas Gandhi, “Now why does the name sound familiar?” [EAAIS 104] to add this confusion and embarrassment his sister is named Indira, of which Mohandas himself is not unaware:

It’s very embarrassing. I have an elder sister, my parents named her Indira. They do not care for confusing families and generations [EAAIS 104].

The parodic mode climaxes with an ironic twist when Mohandas’ story ends. Abruptly with the information that his hand was chopped off by the tribals for ‘raping’ one of their women on the sly. It may be his nemesis or tribal justice for his crime, yet his nomenclatural associations with Mahatma Gandhi lead one to conclude that he is not even a sad travesty of the Father of the Nation whose ideology finds no following in his own nation. No wonder that his statue before the Gandhi Hall, where the National Integration meeting is to be held, is in such a dilapidated condition that a rod has to be fixed to prop up the statue.

Thus, there are several ways in which Chatterjee’s English, August: An Indian story is exceptional among different works of fiction of the 1980s. One cannot but agree with Indu Saraiya’s critical acclaim that; “He brings to the Indian novel a style and feel, a conviction and maturity all its own” [5].
It is also a universal story about growing up and finding one's place in the world, about giving up one's ideals and acceding to the tedious realities and responsibilities of adult life. An unheroic hero, he tries to overcome bureaucratic boredom with the help of drugs, drink and masturbations. Today's India is very different from the nation Chatterjee captures here: more modern, more globalized, more self-confident.
5.2. *The Last Burden* [1993]:

In the fast changing socio-economic scenario created in the modern day world. Young generation prefers for nuclear family set-ups that is responsible for their growing individualism and self-centeredness. Due to what the bonds of old family relations are going to be end, and a feeling of loneliness remains at the end.

In this second novel, *The Last Burden* (*LB*) Upamanyu Chatterjee; deals with the basic structure of Indian society- that is, the family. How the ‘family’, which was the nucleus of Indian society all through the ages, has become “a burden” is the theme of this novel. The novel also recreates life in an Indian family at the end of the twentieth century. It is a novel not about, not about young love or romance or a failed marriage but about old age.

The novel deals with the Indian middle class family that settles down in a new place after the partition. Urmila and shyamanand, both government servants are not very happy as a couple, as a result, their two sons, Burfi and Jamun grow up amidst endless parental bickerings notwithstanding their public school education. Burfi has a Christian wife named Joyce. And their two sons: Doom and Pista are irreverent to their grandparents. It is not a happy family reunion. It is, in fact, there is little true communication in the household. Even Urmila recognizes that she and Shyamanand were so inconsonant; nevertheless they got married. Shyamanand is also crippled emotionally. Urmila and Shyamanand seem to have lived with only a few pat expressions that they would exchange; beyond these squats the silence. They have long not slept together; indeed there is little intimacy between them. As a child Jamun had no idea that it was unusual that parents should not share a bed. Even as a teenager Jamun feels for his parents a love that is only the tenderness of remorse, just a sorrow, a shame at their unhappiness. The family gets by, but much that is familial and warm is
missing. As Jamun eventually learns, there are also things about his parents that he was unaware of. Cultures clash too.

Urmila has been taken ill: she is, as the novel begins, perhaps on her deathbed. The family comes together to see her through these days, lingering then as she slowly recovers. Jamun [unmarried], the son at the Centre of the novel, takes a few days to arrive. Already there are his older brother Burfi [with foreign wife Joyce and their sons, Doom and Pista] and his father Shyamanand. Therefore the money problems are brought to the fore by the medical bills. Shyamanand who is having too much money but not ready to pay he wish his children should pay for. The novel focuses on the family's time together dealing with Urmila's illness, with Jamun's memories of the past, childhood and youth, rounding out the picture. He dreams and hallucinates -- he has visioned a good many hideous things but most of what he sees is starkly real. Among the memories dealt with at length are those concerning a secondary figure, Jamun's Aya, who took care of him when, he was young. Much loved, he quickly outgrew her, but she remained in the household, eventually getting ill and becoming a burden which the family seeks to unload. While there are scenes of some humanity in how they deal with her, the family does simply want to discard her -- and eventually manages to do so. Urmila does tend to her for a while, but is looked down upon for doing so. As elsewhere in the household, one finds some compassion, and a little love, but mostly simply a sense of duty -- stronger for members of the family, weaker for mere servants.

Urmila dies of heart attack and, after a stroke that limits his movements, physically, Shyamanand chooses to live with his other son, Jamun who considers it 'not a bad beginning' as is indicated in the closing line of the book. Burfi is a somewhat happy-go-lucky type fellow, and neither he nor Jamun has lived up to their parents expectations. Burfi's marriage is no longer a particularly happy one. Jamun has yet to really settle down. Jamun has not found a truly happy
relationship. His early love Kasturi remains a friend -- occasionally a very close one indeed--, but is married. Burfi's marriage barely holds together.

Chatterjee realistically presents the new generations attitude through his young characters: Jamun and Burfi. However, they believe that their freedom should not be disturbed either by their parents or by life partners. Chatterjee portrays vividly the awesome burden of family ties whether it is between Shyamanand and Urmila, Joyce and her in-laws or sons and their parents.

The reader is surprised to see a total loss of love and affection between Urmila and Shyamanand apart from their children. Shyamanand is truly a self-centered, male chauvinist and treats his earning wife like a doormat. He lacks the capacity to understand or live with his wife or his sons and daughter-in-law. Though he resents the fact that his son Burfi doesn’t give him enough attention or talks to him, he never leaves an opportunity to insult his wife or sons when they try to take care of him. Even in his illness, he goes to the extent of insulting his wife when she tries to look after him. The relationship between Shyamanand and Urmila is of a strange kind. A purposeless squabble between them goes on all the time. In fact the reader sympathises with Urmila for the treatment she gets after devoting her life looking after him and her sons.

The unexpectedness of her husband’s incivility bruises Urmila the most. She does slew away, instinctively, to withstand Shyamanand’s harshness; it registers with her that even in this, his extremity, his wits’ve found the time both to detest her and designedly to express his loathing. [LB 214]

He needs her company to ridicule her. He would talk to her for days and wouldn’t even answer her questions, if they concern his welfare, his nourishment or his existence. In reply,
He slouches even more implacably over the bank passbooks on his desk, or hoists the science periodical in his hand to wall off her lugubrious face, or, with irksome staginess, as a final expedient, hobbles out of the room. [LB 129]

Shyamanand hasn’t slept with his wife for the last seventeen years, for “they comport themselves like two uncongenial hostellers constrained to room together” [LB 165]. His relationship with his sons is no better. He always resents the fact that his children have always been closer to their mother because he secretly yearns to be close to them, “he only hankers after the love of his children, and is befuddled and piqued, that they plainly prefer their mother” [LB 182]. He finds it difficult to come to terms with the idea that she could be a better human being. Despite the fact that he insults everybody, it should be noted that he likes the sight of his sons and niece around his bed when he fall ill, “a rare sight that swathes Shyamanand’s soul in warmth” [LB 206]. At such moments, the reader cannot help sympathizing with him, for the need for attention is natural and grow more when one gets old. Shyamanand’s and Urmila’s hurt is reasonable, when the two children don’t respond to them even in their illness, in addition to day to day neglect which they suffer from. He is forced to observe, “we could turn to dust here and you in the same house could never be aware till disturbed from your carousel by the stink” [LB 46]. Shyamanand is a person who demands too much of attention from others without offering or giving others anything in return. The reader’s sympathy for him turns into dislike for his self-centeredness. His love for money is an obsession, which Urmila considers a lower middle class trait,

…to mothball the interest on a fixed deposit – never to wade into – with that interest after months to archly open recurring deposit, and with the interest of the recurring deposit to start some term deposit, or national savings – like playing Trader or Monopoly. [LB 64]
He finds it extremely difficult to part with any of his money so much so that he cannot even bear Urmila’s medical expenses and insists that his sons share the expenditure. He has always wanted Urmila to nominate his name in the house after her death, which she should declare in her will. He doesn’t mind talking about Urmila’s money and house but a word of praise or love for her will harm his inflated ego. He is so insensitive that after her death, he is the first one to discuss about her will and settling of medical expenses. He blames everybody but himself for Urmila’s death. As a parent he did not do anything to inculcate good values in his children. He never bothered to tell stories from mythology to his grandchildren also. He has been a self-centered man all through his life. His love for his grandchildren throws some positive light on his character. His plight is pitiable when either of the two sons is not ready to keep him because of his nature, though Jamun welcomes him at the end.

One looks at all the characters in LB through the eyes of Jamun, a male. Jamun, though a male, gives us an unbiased viewpoint and shows some affection towards his mother and Joyce.

Jamun, unlike Burfi does not bother so much about money. He even respects his parents and is a better human being. He is concerned about his parents and tries to involve them in little things so that they don’t feel neglected. Urmila tells Jamun the anger of parents is never anger, he understands, but come to terms with his parents and also begins to find his own place in the world [for a variety of reasons, including unexpectedly becoming a father himself]. He is the one who offers to contribute for his mother’s medical expenses. He wishes that his parents be together and that they touch each other:

Why don’t you and Ma display at least some signs of intimacy, of charity, towards each other. Acquit yourselves a little like some other married couples. Why don’t you stop scuffling with each other for the affection
of your children, and instead ferret contentment out of
yourselves. [LB 161]

His concern for his mother is genuine. He feels that his mother
should retort back instead of crying or weeping after every single
creature rebuffs her time after time:

… If Baba’s not speaking to you, then don’t ask him a
thing! He must learn through discomfort how vital you
are for him.… You must draw blood in return, lash for
lash [LB 180].

He reflects on his mother’s life after her death and feels
she “didn’t deserve what the years apportioned to her” [LB 274].
Though he tries to be a good son, his insensitivity to his father’s illness
is noticeable. His sexual needs come above his concern for his parents.
When Shyamanand was struggling for life, he was busy satisfying
himself with Kasturi, in another room, upstairs. Jamun’s relationship
with Kasturi continues even after her marriage and the outcome is a
child. Both of them don’t mind this, as Kasturi succeeds in befooling
her husband and gives birth to this child. Jamun satisfies his sexual
needs with Kasibai, his maidservant, away from his home. Though he
cannot imagine the idea of his father, staying with him, destroying his
privacy, he welcomes and accepts him at the end. He tries to fulfill his
duties as a son. Overall, Jamun is a modern man who has respect for
his parents but does not want any kind of interference in his ‘free’ life
style.

His father never leaves an opportunity to insult him when he
tries to take care of him. His father says he never pays attention and
listens to him. Burfi too like Shyamanand is a selfish man whose
concerns end on money for [he] and money are like junkie and his fix
in Jamun’s words. His love for money is so great that he avoids talking
about sharing his mother’s bills. Moreover he doesn’t contribute any
amount in the house by way of sharing the expenses. For Burfi, staying
with his parents is gainful for it is substantially cheaper. “Burfi’s chief bestowal on the superintendence of the household is his desultory censure; this taxes neither his mind nor his purse” [LB 117]. He hardly cares for his parents and doesn’t consider asking his parents to join them for a party, or a drink, or offer birthday party. It is a strong comment on the changing values of the younger generation for whom parents have become a burden. Burfi is married to Joyce dreads her. He will not do anything to displease her. His life centers on Joyce and his two children. After Urmila’s death, Shyamanand becomes a burden on him. He requests Jamun to take away their father. In Burfi’s case too, Shyamanand holds Urmila responsible for spoiling him. Examining the behaviour of both Burfi and Jamun they have become more understanding and co-operative towards women.

The novel raises several questions: Should parents interfere in their children’s lives? Should children ignore their parents in their old age? Do parents have no right over their children’s time? Does the husband-wife relationship grow stale in old age? Indian culture has undergone many changes with the fast changing value system. However, the painful reality that, old people become a burden is at the heart of the novel. The burden of ageing parents seems to be universal phenomena irrespective of country or culture.

In this way, to establish a physical relationship before marriage was as much common in the earlier generation of Shyamanand, as it is today. In most cases, parents are a burden today, be it in India or any other country. The concept of old age homes is still not widespread in India as it is in Canada or US. Shyamanand had a strange kind of relationship with his wife, he always insulted his wife. His sons, though caring, are selfish in their own ways and familial ties are a burden to them. However, the modern woman seems to enjoy physical intimacy before marriage as much as the modern man. To have sex before marriage does not entail any kind of responsibility or commitment on the man. This could lead to many complexities in life.
Kasturi cheats her husband by calling Jamun’s child his [her husband’s child]. Jamun doesn’t take the responsibility of the child. There are many such questions, which are a threat to the institution of marriage. Patriarchy has allowed the men to escape from shouldering such responsibilities and put the entire burden on women, be she Kasturi or Kasibai.

Realistically the novel is about the portrayal of Modern India where the children have moved away with looser ties of obligation and family that causes additional strains. Throughout the novel, there is a surprising amount of divorce, adultery and similar failures.