CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

If the world is as crooked and unreal as I think it is becoming, day by day; if one feels less and less power in the face of this unreality, day by day; if the inevitable end is destruction, if not of all life, then of much that is valuable and civilized in life—then why in God’s name is the writer pleased? Why don’t all of our fictional heroes wind up in institutions like Holden Caulfield, or suicides like Seymour Glass? Why is it, in fact, that so many of our fictional heroes...wind up affirming life? (Roth 231).

Modern life meets every creaturely need. Everything we ever wanted is here; except...transcendence (Bellow 44).

A detailed appraisal of the fictional world of Upamanyu Chatterjee shows that it refuses not to seem factual. He confidently comes out as a social realist who is committed to the artistic depiction of the segment of Indian socio-cultural reality with which he is quite familiar. In other words, he writes about those Indians who are the beneficiaries and, at a deeper level, the victims of a revolution more extensive and permanent than usually accepted by the simplistic arguments in favour of modern progress. This revolution caused, and is still causing in the post-colonial urban Indian psyche, the unhinging change brought about by the introduction of English studies which worked in alliance with the materialistic aspirations of the metropolitan Indians. This alliance created, in its wake, the alien, unkind
and unsettling urban milieu inhabited by those who became gradually divorced from the nourishing sustenance of the native sources of cultural enrichment. Thus, uprooted from their tradition, a class of upwardly mobile Indians emerged for whom progress meant proficiency in English backed up by conspicuously high levels of materialistic consumption. As we know well, a borrowed way of life cannot stay put in a vacuum of neutral consumption and materialistic enjoyment. Rather, it is preceded, accompanied and succeeded by some mores and attitudes, which form the mental make-up of the people concerned. And, it must be remembered that it was never meant to be neutral, as noted by a serious academic who writes, 'English literature, as we know, was first introduced in the colonies (and, surprisingly, only afterwards in the mother country) to build an influential native class which the English rulers could co-opt as the conduit of Western thoughts and ideas... (Raina 225-228). The intended class of the Indians came into existence. The co-optation did not stop with the immediate administrative requirement, rather, it dispersed into the vitalities of the cultural personality of the Indians. The most significant dimension of this co-optation was the visible forgetfulness on their part of the fact that to have remained Indian was to have linked with something older and more vital than the recently borrowed ideas of progress and advancement. The situation has been summed up, quite relevantly for a study of a novelist like Upamanyu Chatterjee, in an explicit way by a perceptive commentator on English and related issues,

The anglicized Indian ruling class stands in the same relationship to the rest of its
countrymen as the colonizer was to the colonized. To understand this aspect of the neo-colonial phenomenon, one will have to rethink the concept of India as a homogeneous entity producing in our minds some sort of gestalt, because the fallacy of homogeneity does violence to the lived reality of all Indians (Raina 225-28).

In all the three novels of Upamanyu Chatterjee, the central focus is on the westernised Indians who, owing to their uprootedness, come across as unhappy solitaries forever locked in a doomed and torturous quest for transcendence in well-to-do, successful and vulgar social existence which they can neither love nor leave. In his merciless observation of what prevails around him (Firdaus Kanga, the writer of the novel Trying to Grow, calls Chatterjee ‘a mercilessly gifted observer’ on the back cover page of The Last Burden) the antiheroes like Agastya Sen, Jamun and his lesser clones appear as sufferers of an existential situation which they want to transcend but find themselves unable to do so. It is suggested throughout their lived experiences that their failure to transcend their being modern—supposedly the product of the (European) Enlightenment—is the root of their tragedy. It is ironical that their life has been made a mess by the very forces which were transmitted to them by the educational-cultural project which was considered as a force of liberation from narrowness and an agent of advancement and mental expansion. Herein lies the root of the alienation of the antiheroes of Upamanyu Chatterjee. It does not need repetition that the bed-rock of Chatterjee’s concept of antihero lies in his perception that the modern urban educated Indian youth have their sensibility and outlook maimed by the
very education they have received with enthusiasm. It has worked at two dimensions, the
two being organs of a single major force. The one dimension concerns itself with the failure
of the project of Enlightenment in shaping a healthy, rooted and spiritual way of life, and
the other, as a fallout of the first, works as a force which breaks the antihero away from his
surroundings throwing him into a ditch of selfish careerism devoted only to personal
aggrandisement.

European Enlightenment was supposed to dissolve the injustice of the old inequality,
and so claimed to be the harbinger of a just human society inhabited by enlightened human
beings wherever its light spread through the spread of English education. This claim is
important in a study of the concept of antihero as illustrated in the novels of Chatterjee,
because it was the penumbra of thinking that was inherited by the English educated Indians
through their inculturation. This inculturation was a product of the borrowed cultural legacy
which saw itself as the bearer of the European mantle and distanced itself from
superstition-prone, dirt-laden Indian masses. The apologists of this legacy wanted, in the
name of Order and Progress (the slogan of the Comtean Positivists), to revive a hierarchical
order with the Enlightened as the New Brahmins. Few of them wanted to get rid of that
bedrock of religious obscurantism—the landlords and the native princes—in the process of
imbibing the message during the colonial phase of our mental training. This failure to strike
at the root of obscurantism got translated into a new alienated hierarchical sense of life
backed up by a facade of false love for progress and fellow-feeling. In the course of time it
grew into what came to be called, 'the indefatigable self-destruction of enlightenment' (Adorno and Horkheimer xi). The child of this self-destructive enlightenment was modernity which was lapped up by the cohesive tribe of 'white Indian brown Sahebs' whose creation was endorsed by the (in) famous Minute of Macaulay, discussed in the introductory chapter of this thesis. As we saw, this was the beginning of a methodological divide between the European as the modern and the Eastern as the traditional; the latter patronized and the former tacitly approved. It was a regulation born out of a much touted renaissance.

While reading the novels of Upamanyu Chatterjee one is constantly reminded of the fact that the antiheroic predicament of the characters is the result of modernity gone haywire. In these novels, the phenomenon of modernity appears in its indisputable form, i.e., an extreme emphasis on individuality alienated from the common sources of traditional warmth and emotional sustenance. It is remarkable in this context that Chatterjee does not offer any decontextualised hint toward real or false modernity. He is simply concerned with the socio-cultural condition in which the urban educated Indians find themselves owing to their cultural upbringing guided by their anglo-centric educational training. It pushes them into a situation well described as one where, 'Modernity is ... everywhere, it is simultaneously everywhere, and it is interactively everywhere' (Appadurai and Breckenridge 12). The chief consequence of living in this sea of modernity is a movement away from the mental sphere where a critical reflection on the prevailing culture takes place to one where it is merely consumed. In the process is engendered the antiheroic condition of alienation from the
larger public sphere symbolised by society, state and family. What standout as offsetting contrasts in the work of Chatterjee are some islands conveyed variously by a detached holyman in *English, August: An Indian Story* and a fallen aya in *The Last Burden*. His three novels are an admirable charting out of the antiheroic alienation and its effect on those who lack the nobility of will, purpose and action. In other words, Chatterjee’s fiction explores the facts about the antiheroes. The most conspicuous trait, as reflected in the antiheroic characters of Chatterjee, is a narcissism which infects and makes them seek happiness in a decontextualised existence.

In the novel *English, August: An Indian Story* this liking for seeking personal happiness in a decontextualised and narcissistic fashion comes to us in the form of the anchorless life of a bureaucrat, Agastya Sen, who is so anglicised that he enjoys being called August. In ideal theory, his life as a public servant should be devoted to the service of the people for which he has been appointed. His father, on hearing that his son has been selected for the Indian Administrative service, adumbrates to him the limitless possibilities of experience and knowledge which would be offered to him by his job. He terms his son’s posting in Madna, a typically small town of Indian hinterland, as a journey of knowledge about the rest of India other than Delhi and Kolkata—the other side of metropolitan elite and luxurious life. But as should be expected from an antihero devoid of any nobility of purpose and will to serve the fellow human beings, Agastya soon thinks of quitting his job. He lacks fixity of mind and purpose, what to talk of will to serve fellow humanity? He does
not enjoy his official life which is just an extension of the mess of his personal life, and finds it difficult to get used to the workings of his job and place. He says, ‘I’m wasting my time here and don’t enjoy the wasting’ (131). This honest reflection on the part of the antihero makes his condition poignant. It sums up his educational-cultural upbringing in which the inner being was bypassed and ignored. His so-called progressive anglo-oriented education left him numb, without heart and soul, and with only the outer manifestations of success. The good life was measured only in materialistic terms, leaving him alienated from himself as well as from others. The basic human being was neglected.

As it appears, the chief prop of the concept of antihero in the novels of Upamanyu Chatterjee is his perception that the rupture of human bonding, brought about by the alienating effect of English education, resulted in the rawness of egocentric self. We find in his antiheroes an utter lack of a kindred spirit which whispers that an individual is someone meaningful only because he/she belongs to an entity larger than himself/herself. Its concomitant lack is the lack of a transcendent purpose, a recognition of the importance of order and meaning, a universe of meanings controlled by a higher and more beautiful power. As a consequence, the antihero lives in a world in which righteousness, discipline, accountability, inner stability, perseverance and order remain a constant desideration. The tragic irony is that he pines for warmth and happiness which come from connecting with the outer wide world of human relationships, but all the bridges for him lie burnt down. His predicament was anticipated by an anonymous mediaeval wit,
Faras Gaye Turuk Bani Aye,
Bole Turki Bani,
ab’AB’ (sic) kahi mari mari gaye,
Sirhane dhara tha pani

(Pande 20)

(Those that went to Persia, learnt Persian and since then spoke no other language. Some of them died screaming for aab (Persian for water), while the pitcher of water lay next to their beds).

In The Mammaries of The Welfare State we find Chatterjee’s concept of antihero assuming a form in which the greater emphasis is on the antiheroic milieu represented by an unsympathetic, corrupt and lecherous politico-bureaucratic set up. Being a sequel of English, August, this novel has Agastya as the central character. But what is dramatically noticeable is the disproportionately larger emphasis on the exploitative power of the political system represented by the entity ironically called Welfare State. A close analysis of this text suggests that here Chatterjee appears as believing that the culture which alienates the metropolitan educated youth from the masses and produces the assembly line of men like Agastya, nay, August, would congeal into an alienated structure of power which would indulge in self-aggrandisement and sadistic rule over the hapless people of the country. Here the state is all powerful, and the obverse of this power is the despicable helplessness of the
individual. The antihero Agastya of English, August has not changed in any significant way in The Mammaries; the only change that has occurred in him is that he has become more cynical. The reader has the constant feeling that the world which the antihero inhabits cries for a nobility of will and sacrifice, but what he finds writ inexorably in the textual world of the novel is the utter cynicism of the antihero, who is clear in his mind about his brand of cynic solution of the problem,

...change the rules and the game, and redefine discretion, to include dishonesty. Our consciences will then rest, our hearts won’t go thump-thump each time we note the possibilities of the fast buck in each file, so fewer cardiac arrests, substantial economies in medical reimbursement (Chatterjee 342).

Such outrageous administrative suggestions are the product of the antiheroic mind which is touted to be applied in the service of the poor and the down-trodden. It is a mark of the social realism of Upamanyu Chatterjee that he grounds his antiheroes in the actualities of their time and, so, gives them an unmistakably contemporary relevance. Being himself a serving bureaucrat, he always appears to have the firm grip over the working of the government system which he confidently marshals in two of his novels as the terrain on which his concept of antihero unfolds through the characters. For the readers this terrain is absolutely believable, and so the working of the characters’ minds get added interest in the course of reading. Further, it makes the twin novels, English, August and The Mammaries.
authentically Indian novels about believably Indian theme and characters. Especially the latter is entirely devoted to the larger than life role of the state. This role in the novels serves two purposes for the novelist. On the one hand, it highlights the poignancy of the predicament of the antihero by belittling his position in the actual scheme of things, on the other, it grounds the narrative firmly in the Indian context. As a historian of modern India remarks, 'From history and ideology Indians are predisposed toward a major government role in social-economic welfare programmes. Maibaap is an ingrained attitude... (Austin 44)

The contextual grounding of the antihero in the modern Indian realities also comes out quite vividly in the last novel *The Last Burden*, but in a different garb. Here we find the phenomenon of generational conflict in all its sordidness. It is a novel written in the last decade of the just departed country, whose bitter taste still lingers on in the mouth. Here we see two sons, Burfi and Jamun, growing up into westoxified, rootless individuals, each in his own way unable to form lasting relationships in the family or outside. Neither are they able to define themselves in terms of their culture or religion. There is a sense of dislocation from all traditions and conventions, played out against the traditionally hallowed institution of the Indian family which lies crumbled here in the ruins of mutual rancour and hatred among the members. The antiheroic protagonist is reluctant to go to see his sick mother when he hears about her cardiac problem, though he thinks he loves her more than he does the father! such is the world the protagonist lives in, and such is the emotion he has
in his heart. The entire novel suggests its multiple fingers to the phenomenon of the revolt of children against their parents. This phenomenon is rooted in the expansive economic opportunities which take the children away from their warm sources, in terms both of geography and value systems, turning them into plastic human beings enamoured of their own idea of good life. This idea operates on the premise that family relationships, even filial responsibilities, are a 'burden' that has to be cast off. The time-rooted-ness of the novel *The Last Burden* brings to mind the stark prognostication made by a commentator on Indian socio-cultural issues, expressed in very clear terms, 'For the first time in its history, economic change has accelerated; if it goes on like this, the young will no longer need their parents' (Desai 176).

The basic thrust of the concept of antihero as illustrated in Upamanyu Chatterjee's novels is the crisis of values reflected in loss of sensitivity in the face of injustice and inhumanity. The brutalization of Indian society, thus, becomes the central object of Chatterjee's creative focus. The debut novel, *English, August: An Indian Story* and its sequel *The Mammaries of the Welfare State* show through their thematic emphasis that in India the deadliest forms of brutalisation are openly backed and perpetrated by the state power. Political and bureaucratic larceny and corruption is the terrain upon which the novelist's exploration of the mental makeup of his antiheroes takes place, as far as these two novels are concerned. The artistic handling of the theme of larceny saves the novels from falling to the level of a boilerplate presentation of corruption in government. Having sarcasm at heart and flitting back and forth in time and space, Chatterjee keeps the reader on an engaging
treadmill of a fictional world which refuses not to seem factual. Particularly when one reads the sequel *The Mammaries of the Welfare State*, the story-line tempts one to fall for the referential dimension of the novel, for the simple reason that our politico-bureaucratic world has become so immorally dark. But a closer reading reveals the fact that it has below the surface a self-contained artifice of imaginative effort. This below-the-surface essence links it with the other two novels, the linking essence being the valueless mental world of the antiheroes.

The antiheroes of Upamanyu Chatterjee are the product of the culture of individualism, me-first-ism, which inevitably reduces the collective human existence to a zero-sum game in which one must trample upon others for fear of being trampled upon by them. Obviously, such a cultural regime engenders ideological consequences and corollaries whose motto is—winning is all, losing is to become less than human. Chatterjee began his creative career in the last years of the decade of 1980s; naturally, his concept of Indian antiheroes has as its building blocks the tendencies of the modern aspiring urban middle class for whom economic efficiency is the sole criterion into which all evaluative criteria collapse. The powerful ideology of managerialism which is, when all the platitudes and cliches have been removed, all about manipulating other people in the service of a higher, indeed, the highest end of personal profit, has a particularly strong pull for the antiheroes. In *English, August: An Indian Story*, the glamour attached with Dhrubo, the managerial job hopper, is illustrative of this power. It is quite significant in Chatterjee's scheme of antiheroic
things that Dhurbo continues his glamorous existence in the sequel novel The Mammaries. He continues to be valuable for Agastya Sen, the antiheroic protagonist living an antiheroic life of two novels. This managerial fascination for pelf mingles with the obscene celebration of a cultural process symbolised by Channel V and MTV.

Upamanyu Chatterjee, in one of his interviews, said about Agastya, 'He is a morally loose man in a morally loose world' (Nambisan 01). This statement, while binding his antiheroes with the world they live in, drives home the point of valuelessness as a factor of the hegemony of the impersonal cultural process and the powerlessness of the weak-willed antiheroes in the face of that hegemony. The sad state of values is, as we see illustrated by the antiheroic lives of the antiheroes like Dhurbo, Agastya Sen, Jamun and others, an effect, a symptom, a consequence of the powerful underlying processes; their degraded values are another name for their ordinary, everyday accommodations with the situations they are forced to live with. The systemic signals emerging from their brave new world are unambiguous—you must adjust, because the guiding processes and phenomena are happening at a level that is beyond the reach of imaginable intervention. The sphere of values, on the other hand, appears amenable to wilful intervention. It is starkly illustrated in the cold reaction of Agastya Sen to his father's advice to know the world sympathetically to serve it better. When being posted to a small place like Madna in the Indian rural hinterland, his father is elated that his son will have an opportunity to know the other face of India, which is hidden from the Indians living in a megapolis like Delhi or Kolkata. But the antiheroic Agastya feels more
at home in a megapolis than in a small, nondescript rural place. It shows his inner disjunction from the larger mass of humanity. Likewise, the case of Jamun of *The Last Burden* is an illustration of loss of values in the context of the emotional bond in the family. The acrimonious conjugal relations apart, even the fatal illness and eventual death of a mother do not move the sons in the manner expected in a naturally Indian cultural environment. What runs as a tapeworm in the structure of the novels is the constant realization on the part of the readers that the antiheroes suffer from a severe crisis of values.

It is significant from the point of view of valuelessness of the antiheroes of Chatterjee that they are all urban educated men living lives marked by alienation from their natural larger communities, state and people in *English, August* and *The Mammaries* and family in *The Last Burden*. Their acquired value systems go against the value that require them to serve and be loyal in their emotions to the entities larger than themselves. The acquisition of conflicting value-systems has occurred in the process of their being educated. The education as well as the process of its acquisition come under the creative attack of the novelist when we see the antiheroes as their creations. In a moment of brief introspection Agastya Sen reflects about the study of Hamlet in India as being 'absurd' (Chatterjee 06). An authorial comment in the novel *The Last Burden* is revealing as far as the educational nurturing of the antiheroes is concerned. The comment is representative in covering all the antiheroic metropolitan personalities who are divorced from their moorings. It throws ample light on the alienating potential of the education that the antiheroes receive. The novelist
An education in a Jesuit school and college, the fellowship of friends who conversed on and thought about consequential matters principally in English, and in general the snarled ins and outs of their fosterage, have piloted Burfi and Jamun to discounting, even pooh-poohing, the worlds of their own languages (134-35).

The essential message which emanates from this highly significant observation is that the growth of the antiheroes contains the unmistakable tendency to turn them into future sufferers of an antiheroic destiny marked by purposelessness, moral uncertainly and alienation from their sustaining sources of inner consolation. The most crucial years pass in a situation in which they are encouraged, and even forced, to cut themselves off from all those formal and informal learning environments in which they might encounter the messy and complex reality of the human condition. Additionally, family life is reduced to the relatively one-dimensional unit of the nuclear family: husband and wife and two children, leading anxious, shallow lives in a metropolitan flat. They lose the most formative years in which they might have become human and humane, the reason of this loss being the ultra competitive environment in which the children, rather, the future antiheroes, operate, ricocheting between classes and more classes. Their educational nurturing cuts them off from their roots, moorings and environment. In the process, they grow as damaged individuals devoid of the values which have the creative capacity to mould and shape the growing
personalities into truly human, sensitive entities. What happens in the absence of these shaping values is the mushrooming of success stories and role models whose anomic self-obsessions cast a comprehensive demonstration effect that reverberates through society as a whole. What stands out most starkly amidst all this is the lack of moral sensitivity in the thinking of the antiheroes. They are so self-obsessed that the morally crucial awareness does not seep into their being—that the complex human world is an interconnected web of individuals, a world in which all our actions have consequences for known and unknown others. This simple fact is the basis of morality; and, unsurprisingly, its lack in the mental world of the antiheroes makes them immoral. They do not realize that one is more and less moral to the extent that one's mind and imagination have been educated, enabled and encouraged to comprehend this ramifying interdependence.

The valuesless and alienated existence of Chatterjee's antiheroes is an index of their failure to enter into the lives and consciousness of people other than themselves, to become aware of the subtle and nuanced ways in which it might have dawned upon their feeling that they are a part of indivisible continent of humanity. Their obsession with their own petty desires for pleasure and flitting happiness has robbed them of the much needed existential strength to feel empathy with the larger world. Their imagination has not been trained to look beyond its grossly immediate confines of personal needs and appetites. The antiheroic protagonist of the first two novels, English, August and The Mammaries, is a public servant of a high official standing and he sees corruption and injustice all around himself without
being morally perturbed. The sufferings of the down-trodden and the stipulated ideals about fighting and removing them do not concern his inner being. Because he lacks the power to empathetically leap into the plight of others—to feel that he has been there too, been the victim of bureaucratic high-handedness, been the tribal who has had his world destroyed and devastated by the exploitative state mandarin, been the child who has watched his mother who has fallen asleep weeping for the child who will never return. The antihero is what he is precisely because he lacks the human awareness that other people are people too, that other creatures are creatures too. This lack establishes the antihero as a wooden personality devoid of the foundation of moral being.

Suffering from The Postmodernist Vacuum of Ideas

The antiheroes of Upamanyu Chattrjee’s novels live in that existential state which can be characterised as postmodern, particularly considering their utter lack of motivating ideas. Rather, they do not believe in the validity of ideas which are larger than their petty lives, circling around their considerations of personal weal and woe. At a deeper level, the antiheroes like Agastya and Jamun hint, through their ideational rudderlessness, that they live in a time when big ideas of morality and service do not move the self-centred individuals. Social and cultural thinkers have identified the principles of postmodernism as those which pit it against tradition and modernity. Postmodernism transcends modernity, which itself surpasses tradition. Thus the cardinal principle of postmodernism is that all that was valid
in modernity is totally invalid and obsolete in postmodern thinking. A notable commentator on socio-cultural issues of postcolonial age writes:

Modernity was framed by what are called, in the technical jargon of cultural studies, Grand Narratives: that is, Big ideas that give sense and direction to life. Such notions as Truth, Reason, Morality, God, Tradition and History, argue postmodernists, do not live up to analytical scrutiny—they are totally meaningless. And all world views that claim absolute notions of Truth, for example, Science, Religion..., are artificial constructions that are totalitarian by their very nature. Truth is relative, contingency is everything... Nothing has an intrinsic nature which may be expressed or represented, and everything is a product of time and chance (Sardar 234).

As is clear, this cultural situation typifies a rejection of all forms of truth claims and acceptance of nothing as worthy of absolute validity, coupled with a rejoicing of total relativism.

It is quite visible in the novels of Upamanyu Chatterjee that the antiheroic personalities have no faith in ideas of truth, morality and other things of human sacredness. As a natural corollary to this lack of faith, these antiheroes suffer from an insistent tendency to deny the reality which prevails around them. They see what they want to see, what their position in time and place allows them to see, what their socio-cultural perceptions have
conditioned them to focus on. Agastya Sen of *English, August: An Indian Story* and *The Mammaries of the Welfare State* lives in an actual sea of commonly undeniable realities of widespread poverty and deprivation on the one hand and bureaucratic corruption, carnality, larceny, loot, plunder and indulgence in numerous acts of immorality on the other. The ugliness and seediness of his living environment cries out for his meaningful intervention, but what he is always concerned with is his petty personal problems of food, mosquito, bodily exercises, marijuana, sexual voyeurism and other trivial issues, all marked by their meaninglessness vis-à-vis the required duties of a highly placed public servant. Likewise, Jamun, the antiheroic protagonist of the novel *The Last Burden*, is more interested in his own narrowly defined personal needs of body and mind than in his expected duties as a son whose parents clash emotionally day in and day out, making the hallowed institution of Indian family a virtual hell. The mental frame of the antiheroes is such that a desire for inquiry into the issues starkly living at hand does not trouble them. They just go on and on, as if being pushed by the force of their shallow lives. Their imagination roams just to the places and activities that might give pleasures to them. At this level those antiheroes are intellectually retarded human beings, living their lives of mediocrity. Their mediocrity operates at the twin levels of conforming to the average and refusing to go deeper into their life's issues and reflect off the beaten track of immediate personal needs. For them, conforming to the average has become the highest meaning of life, as they suffer from a chronic state of cultural and cognitive stasis. Its manifestation is in their giving ultimate priority to wanting to feel better. This need to feel better is not guided by any grounding the
subjective self in a shared relationship with the fellow humanity but by decontextualising it from the vortex of the hard realities of the life around. In a sense, the antiheroes are lifeless consumers of life's amenities, for whom Francis Fukuyama prognosticates very poignantly:

...the end of history will be a very sad time. The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one's life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems... and satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands (Fukuyama 18).

Limitation of the Concept

It must be accepted that the concept of antihero as we find elucidated in the novels of Upamanyu Chatterjee does not hint toward an alternative vision of the urban Indian man. The image of the modern Indian is here anything but edifying. His antiheroes, in the novels, do not have countervailing heroes whose nobility and commitment to a noble purpose could make the antiheroic see its face more clearly in the mirror of edifying values. The antiheroes like Agastya Sen and Jamun suffer much, but their suffering does not rise up to an experience of spiritual enrichment. We have two novels, English, August: An Indian Story and The Mammaries of the Welfare State which have the antiheroic Agastya as the protagonist, but all the fictional length remains devoid of any inner awakening in him.
Likewise, Jamun of *The Last Burden*, entangled in the web of acrimonious family relationships, suffers his life like an unbearable ‘burden’ without breaking the prison of suffering. Chatterjee conceives his antiheroes at a level gaze, they do not rise up to a higher level of consciousness where they could find meaning, detachment and wisdom and so transcend their agonizing circumstances. It shows, at a fundamental level, a disclination toward making an attempt to reach out to the spiritual reservoir of the Indian tradition. This reaching out could have given these novels an added dimension of depth. One of the doyens of Indian English literary criticism aptly remarks,

> It’s well known that when societies are faced with a crisis of any magnitude, they can only fall back on their own time-tested resources, in the life of the spirit, especially so in India, because of impoverishment of the contemporary cultural scene in the so-called civilized world. The tiger and the ape snarl their teeth and bare their nails and we better look into ourselves for sustenance (Narasimhaiah 17).

In contrast to Upamanyu Chatterjee, the three great novelists of the first generation of Indian English novel—Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and, above all, Raja Rao—asserted the indubitable efficacy of the spiritual in times of life’s crisis. The readers of Anand, who is known for Leftist causes in his novels, are deeply struck when they see his cobbler moved to say his prayer to settle his accounts with his Creator. More so with R.K. Narayan, whose characters of average human potentiality rise above their average condition through
acts of the spirit. A vagabond like Raju in *The Guide* gladly lays down his life for the good of the people. A sweet vendor, in *The Vendor of Sweets*, carries his chequebook to the forest to help the poor foreign girl (whom his wayward son had picked up on his way back from overseas) out if she wished to return to her country. The case of Raja Rao is all the more enriching. His villagers have the immense potential to respond to the Gandhian movement and make a success of it in *Kanthapura*. His every novel is dedicated to the triumph of the spiritual in human beings. Nearer to Upamanyu Chatterjee in time, Arun Joshi, a novelist deeply concerned with the modern condition and its inescapable ordeals, makes his central character overcome with remorse for his ill deeds. This remorse spurs in him a spiritual awakening after which he chooses to sit at the bottom of the steps to a temple diligently polishing the shoes of the devotees—his way of working off his sins. Another contemporary novel, *The Silver Pilgrimage* of Ananathanarayan, reiterates the characteristically Indian way of transforming a hopeless young man to the path of wisdom.

What binds all these novels together is that their total vision, right from the emergence of the crisis to its solution, is Indian. Their chief concern is a certain type of individual—ambitious, affluent, possessive, rational, self-centred, introspective, by turns; at last, finding salvation in an assertion of spiritual values of detachment from and transcendence of gross materiality.

As we have seen in the course of the discussion of all his novels, the fate of Upamanyu Chatterjee’s antiheroes remains untouched by any such grace. It is true that they are prone
to occasional introspections but their looking into themselves baulks at the surface of their selves. Their introspection does not reach the depth of ‘the realisation of the fact that man’s dilemma... is no longer merely in consequence of causes or situations but is rooted in man himself’ (Prasad 168). These antiheroes lack, as their study shows, strength of mind to alter their living, thinking and being. That is why we sometimes feel that in their cases introspection in itself is not enough, because their lack of inner strength makes it an indulgence, rather than a path to spiritual awakening and the consequent transformation. Agastya Sen of English, August and The Mammaries reflects on the malaise afflicting the politico-bureaucratic system but his reflections do not lead him to any meaningful action, leaving his thinking arid and dry. Likewise, the antiheroic protagonist of the novel The Last Burden display his awareness about the sordid situation of his family relations but is unable to rise up to the level of the will to transform. These sufferers of their respective existential conditions need to grow a lot more, of which they are incapable. They end where they begin. Like Hieronymo, they are mad again, and yet again. In that sense there is no progression in their character.

But is there progression in life? Being a social realist, Chatterjee seems to ask this question through his novels. He obviously does not want his antiheroic protagonists to fall into the conventional pattern of the hero, with different phases—one being an improvement over the other. Thus, he has captured the realistic aspect of life. The significance and relevance of his concept of the antihero lies mainly in this. The state of loneliness, depression and
frustration as depicted in his novels is not so much a human crisis in the traditional sense of arising and being solved at a denoument as an effective warning in its remaining unresolved. The development of Chatterjee as a novelist bears witness to it. His debut novel *English, August: An Indian Story* has an oasis of spiritual detachment in the presence, though very small, of a holy man who serves the sick and downtrodden at his ashram in a forest, though Agastya Sen fails to get inspired from him. But in the subsequent novels *The Last Burden* and *The Mammaries of The Welfare State* there is no much oasis of selfless life and transcendence of grossness. What we have in the novels is a world bursting at the seams under the weight of selfishness, rancour, corruption and sordidness of almost every imaginable kind, beating against and co-opting the weak-willed and deracinated antiheroic protagonists. In the name of positive characters, we have Agastya’s father who, remaining at the margin, advises his son to know the to Indian hinterland, Jamun’s suffering mother who is well-meaning but finds herself incapable of meaningfully revolting against her torturing husband. We come across not a single character who can be called a personality of heroic mettle.

The full significance of Chatterjee’s concept of antihero is realized when we see him as, in the words of Salman Rushdie, ‘a clear-eyed witness responding to the here and now in precisely that fashion which Naipaul inaccurately calls uniquely Western’ (Rushdie 172). He shows the present devastated condition of the modern urban Indian youth with ruthless realism of perception. His novels examine how the public realm encroaches on
the private and reduces the inner power of the individual, however sophisticated he might appear in the public eye. For him, the public realm is a composite of institutions, attitudes, expectations and values particularised by readily identifiable spokesmen who are sustained by empty and meaningless self-centredness. He seems to agree with Saul Bellow that

...realistic literature from the first has been a victim literature. Pit any ordinary individual—and realistic literature concerns itself with ordinary individuals—against the external world and the external world will conquer him, of course. Everything that people believed in the nineteenth century about determinism, about man’s place in nature, about the power of productive forces in society, made it inevitable that the hero of the realistic novel should not be a hero but a sufferer who is eventually overcome (Bellow 61).

Chatterjee is that kind of novelist who is keenly responsive to the human condition as it is revealed in contemporary Indian experience. He confidently comes out as a creative writer who has a grip on our experiences as we wobble along as a society. We turn to him to find out something of where we are and what we are doing with our life. His concept of antihero, as elucidated through his novels, establishes him as a significant contemporary author with a clear and critical social vision. His uniqueness is closely associated with his commitment to social realism, to a willingness to confront the community—its manners and its mores—as subject for his art. The confrontation between his antiheroes and their world, between
private and public realms, between individuals and the shaping forces of life, resulting into a defeat of the former, is central to the novels of Chatterjee.

The noted Indian English critic, Meenakshi Mukherjee, calls our attention to the fact that right from the beginning of Indian writing in English as a recognisable literary phenomenon the writers, ‘as a ballast to the supposed alienness / elitism of the language, tended to deploy certain thematic or formal devices to tether their texts to indigenous texts’ (Mukherjee 81). It is true, and naturally so, that Indian themes have always dominated the Indian writing in English, the relevance of the themes and their handling by the writers being decisive in their respective merit and value. But Mukherjee is not wholly right when she remarks that ‘If the anxiety of Indianness in Raja Rao, Anand and Narayan came out of their own desire to be rooted, the anxiety of the new generation who can thrive on easy international accessibility may be attributed to the pressures of the global market place which demand that Upamanyu Chatterjee’s English, August... should be subtitled ‘An Indian Story,... (ibid 90). She seems to suggest here that Chatterjee has an eye on the western market. But a close reading of his novels suggests that in depicting the Indian antiheroes, he is not playing to the gallery. He is intensely concerned with the predicament of the decultured metropolitan Indian youth who can’t but appear as how they appear in his realistic vision. We should note that the new parameters and agendas in the evaluation of third world writers by the western centres of criticism and publication privileges issues of migrancy and cultural hybridity, as represented by Salman Rushdie and Bjarati Mukherjee and others like them.
For them, Indianness remains important, but only as a metaphor, India less as a real place, more as a set of imaginative references. Experiences of rootlessness and displacement are privileged over the actual day-to-day living realities. The novelist, Bharati Mukherjee, candidly accepts about herself that ‘... Indianness is now a metaphor, a particular way of comprehending the world’ (Mukherjee vi). On the contrary, for Upamanyu Chatterjee, India is neither a metaphor nor a philosophical idea. Through his novels, he speaks to those for whom the murky reality of today’s India is confronted daily at a non-metaphoric level, for whom India is not merely a trope. And the significance of Chatterjee’s realistic vision lies in the fact that it resonates with the readers’ knowledge of present day Indian reality.

As far as Meenakshi Mukherjee’s comment on subtitling of the debut novel as ‘An Indian Story’ is concerned, it is quite significant considering the obvious fact of the visible thrust towards a homogenisation of Indian culture, motored by the English language and the sudden communication revolution. In this sense, the subtitle speaks for all the three novels of Chatterjee, because both Agastya Sen and Jamun, along with their lesser clones, are the products and victims of the cultural amnesia helped and abetted by this homogenisation. The culture constructed by the media, the advertisement and entertainment industry—a slicker and more attractive package than what real life in India can offer—is successfully devouring the vibrancy of the local and the regional sub-cultures. It is not for nothing that English, August: An Indian Story has the sequel titled The Mammaries of the Welfare State. The story-line of the novel The Last Burden has the Indian family as its central thematic prop.
As everybody knows, the institution of family has been a venerated presence in the Indian consciousness. So it is a significant dimension of Chatterjee’s concept of antihero that we find it grounded in the real entity called the Indian society simultaneously progressing and suffering. It can be said that Chatterjee’s novels seem to be an exemplification of Fredric Jameson’s formulation that ‘all third world writings are ultimately national allegories’ (Ramanan 114).

The concept of antihero as we find illustrated in the novels of Upamanyu Chatterjee is a call to consciousness. It can be said that a strong social and moral consciousness, coupled with a realistic portrayal of man in society, points to Chatterjee’s distinctiveness as a contemporary Indian novelist. He sees his antiheroes as an ineluctable part of their society and examines to what extent they have been victimised by false ideals and self-deceptions grounded in that society. In so doing he holds a mirror up to our condition and forces us to reflect on the consequences of what we as a society are doing. He may not be a great author, but he is definitely one of the authentic voices of our time. His critical realism puts him in that tradition of Indian English fiction in which we have Mulk Raj Anand with his anger at the class and caste inequities in a hierarchic Hindu society, Bhabani Bhattacharya’s exposure of religious charlatanism and Kamala Markandeya’s concern with the suffering of the unspecified Indian woman. What binds all these is the creative disagreement with what prevailed in the then societies. Similarly, the hallmark of Upamanyu Chatterjee is his exposure of the hollowness and rootlessness of the deracinated class of
metropolitan modern Indian. This class was the product of the colonial encounter which was forced upon us, and which engendered the project of disruption of culture and thinking patterns of the Indians who enlisted themselves in the vanguard of alienating cultural training. Chatterjee’s creative concentration on the alienated class of Indians has the message that in its bid to carry the modernity project further the intelligentsia gets alienated from the very people it wants to serve. The modernising elite groups position themselves, at the mental level, outside the native reality, and that mental distance condenses both the reality and their own condition into opposing entities sharply opposed to, and at war with, each other. This opposition, in the novels of Upamanyu Chatterjee, takes a bizarre form in the unthinking exploitation, loot and plunder of the mute mass of Indians by the alienated bureaucrats and politicians. In between these two extremities of the rapacious exploiters and the unprotesting exploited, the antiheroic protagonists lead their purposeless lives, confining themselves to the fulfilment of their own marrow personal needs. They see the corruption and depravity all around them, but they walk on in amoral passivity, readying themselves to be sucked into the systemic morass of inaction and pettiness of thinking. The alienated class of Indians is exposed.

In one of his much alluded to interviews, the novelist says that Agastya Sen ‘is a character I am comfortable with. I enjoy writing about him, I enjoy watching him grow’ (Nambisan: 4). It shows his commitment to the creative project of exploring the antiheroic Indian personality. It is because of the fact that he always considers himself to be an uncompromising realist. Amidst all the hype of global economic prosperity and Indian