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The Mammaries of the Welfare State:
'Everyday' of Moral Degeneration

R. P. Singh

The Mammaries of the Welfare State is a sequel to Chatterjee's first novel English August: An Indian Story. In between came The Last Burden, a poetic rendering of the collapse and disintegration of familial ties and values in an average Indian family at the end of the twentieth century. This novel hinted that as a rising and seriously creative novelist, Upamanyu Chatterjee has brilliantly entered the fascinating domain of human relationships after doing a brilliant job of creatively debunking Indian bureaucracy and the socio-intellectual system that nurtures it. English August is a beautiful novel which deals with the immediate theme of Indian bureaucracy's proneness to moral turpitude. Being a serious attempt at hitting the Kafkaesque target, the novel encompasses within its creative ambit the entire edifice that houses and breeds the denizens of the world portrayed. The starkly instrumental approach to the study or literature - the necessity to study something as unnecessary as Hamlet... is absurd... but also inevitable... is seamless with this piece of practical wisdom - 'There is nothing such as absolute honesty, there are only degrees of dishonesty'.

English August does not irk with any sense of incompleteness. Then, why a sequel? One can answer that the full blaze of the entrails of the systemic malaise is not adequately visible in English August. After dealing with the nurturing ethos as a psycho-cultural function through the novel English August has its share of the misconducts of the mandarins of different levels), Chatterjee needed a separate canvas to display the full drama of la quotidienne of the corrupt bureaucratic system. The French term has been inadequately but usefully translated as 'Everyday', which, at the conceptual level, is a contribution of Henri Lefebvre towards understanding society through concentration on the everyday details of the lived life. 'Everyday' refers to that which repeats itself consistently in daily life, something excluded by most philosophers of the West - from Plato to Hegel - from serious consideration. James Joyce in literature and Henri Lefebvre in philosophy explored this dimension of daily life that Marx, in spite of his orientation towards it, could not explore, completely preoccupied as he was with the domain of labour and capital. It is what Hegel called the prose of the world, something considered unworthy of serious attention like labour before Marx, or libido before Freud.
Henri Lefebvre visualises 'Everyday' as a kind of screen on which details of actual life float and form patterns of meanings. Though he grounds this concept in a Marxist context of class and cultural understanding, it can be fruitfully deconstructed into a useful tool to study a novel like The Mammaries of the Welfare State, which has for its theme the day-to-day regimen of the corrupt and depraved mandarins of the 'Welfare State'. People like the high state official Bhupen Raghupati, the politician Makhmal Bagai, the astrologer Baba Mastram, the artist Rajani Suroor and several others play out the daily drama of venality and depravity on the bare bosom of the Welfare State.

The artistic handling of the theme of bureaucratic larceny saves the novel 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. Our time has robbed 'suspension of disbelief' of the gravitas of aesthetic relevance, particularly when one reads a novel like The Mammaries of the Welfare State. The story-line tempts the reader to refer to the referential dimension of the novel. But a closer reading reveals that this novel is a self-contained artifice of imaginative effort, which confronts what prevails in society. The welfare state, here, does not mean a state for the welfare of the people, but a hunting ground for predatory sharks who masquerade as public servants. Chatterjee's vision of evil is not selective and surgical, but inclusive and expansive. The dominating frame is politico-bureaucratic larceny and rapaciousness, but the novel takes within its luminous ambit the entire ambit of socio-cultural life, making time itself appear 'out of joint'. One gets a full-view glimpse into the multidepartmental degeneration of the entity called the Welfare State. The core of this degeneration is a satanic hunger for power, pelf and flesh, with the concomitant devilish commitment to satiate it. The imaginative centre of this degeneration is the perverse and macabre puja room scene in which Bhupen Raghupati assaults, both sexually and physically, his lackey, Chamundi, a poor tribal boy from the dark undeveloped pit of the Welfare State. This scene touches the status of a metaphor which encompasses the psycho-physical erud of the moral degeneration of the institution 'allegedly' constructed for public service and welfare. Carnal desire is a running motif at the level of phantasy as well as physically, and forms a crucial component of the exploitative psyche of the mandarin-politician nexus. Carnality is confidently boasted of as energy by Raghupati who consults Baba Mastram on how to release it. For Raghupati, whose 'sensualism was legend' in the grapevine, sexual escapades and assaults are manifestations of power. And he is perversely
committed to exercise his power. The disturbing poignancy of this metaphor lies in Chamundi being the symbol of the exploited, utterly meek, mute and powerless.

This metaphorical content could have been firmer and richer had Baba Mistrani been allowed to develop as a calibrated and textured symbol of the religious establishment in collusion with the political. He appears just as a pliable tool to be deployed by Raghuram at will. He provides the 'spiritual' sanction for the predatory campaigns of the exploiter, but without having the critical mass required for the power to be representative of a complex socio-cultural force like religion.

Despite this weak link, the novel is notable avant-garde intervention in the affairs of our actualities. Avant-garde art, as Peter Burger and E.V. Ramakrishnan believe, is a negation of the autonomy of art. It is the art of engagement with life. In The Mammarys of the Welfare State we come across a head-on engagement.

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2. ibid, p.138