CHAPTER III

English, August: An Indian Story

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

Upamanyu Chatterjee has emerged as one of the most compelling new voices in the domain of Indian novel in English. His metier lies in his wry microscopic rendition of Indian kitsch in all its varieties and diversities ranging from the metropolitan life of Delhi and Calcutta (now Kolkata) to that of innermost recesses of Indian geography represented by places like Madna and Jompanna. His debut novel English, August: An Indian Story is a fascinating metaphor of contemporary youth's failed quest for self-realization. The novel can be read at two levels. On the surface level, this novel is a commentary on the administrative services of India: the corruption in high bureaucratic places, high-handedness, inefficiency, oppressive routine of the system, utter indifference of the administration to the eradication of poverty and social evils, acute class and rank consciousness among the IAS hierarchy, and the little snobberies and petty jealousies of the so called public servants — all these form the surface texture of this novel. But at the deeper level, it is a frank discussion of the predicament in which an intelligent and educated modern youth finds himself. There is a
hovering sense of dislocation from all traditions and conventions which he finds meaningless. The novel describes a journey, sometimes pathetic, sometimes humorous, even ridiculous—a journey from rootlessness to attempted but failed maturity, a struggle to come to terms with oneself. The novel, at the end, gives a feeble impression of success in the attempt at maturity by experience, but its sequel *The Mammaries of the Welfare State* does loudly proclaim that even after experiences of almost a decade, Agastys Sen, who likes to be called August by his friends, does not change. He fails to gain maturity of spirit because he is not capable of any positive change. He is powerless in action; his only power lies in phantasy. He is an antihero because he lacks the usual qualities associated with heroism. He is an average man, something of a bungler. We know that the term anti-hero refers to the small, good-hearted rebel protesting against his society with clownish gestures. The post-1950 English novelists repeatedly presented antiheroes in their fiction as protagonists. The crux of antiheroism lies in the fact that its representative is not clear about what is precisely wrong with his society, always feeling that it is all full of humbug and deception. Agastya reminds one of William Cooper's Joe Lunn (*Scenes From Provincial Life*), Kingsley Amis' Jim Dixon (*Lucky Jim*) and others like them.

A closer study of the novel *English, August: An Indian Story* reveals that through his antiheroic protagonist, Chatterjee gives the message that today's English educated Indian urban youth, steeped in careerism, is a victim of the breakdown of meaningful communication and relationship with his society. There is no assurance here that outward action reveals any
significant fact about the doer, nor is any claim that public gestures provided by society can achieve any real communication between individuals. It is remarkable that the antiheroic protagonist represents his antiheroic milieu. As Thorslev writes ‘The hero gives one the broader, and deeper perspective of the spirit of the age which he represents’ (Thorslev 20).

The Antihero, Agastya Sen, Represents His Time

Robert E. Spiller in his much discussed article titled ‘Literary History’ posits the idea of ‘the peak of a literary movement’ (Spiller 55-68) represented by literary production of a single or closely related kind in a comparatively short period of time and space. The decade of 1980s, in the context of Indian fiction in English, marks just such a peak. Nearly two dozen significant novels have been written in this decade, almost all bearing a similarity. What we may call the common thread binding them all is the individual at the centre, struggling against the ugliness of life and the socio-political system. His sensibility is modern, he knows the provisional quality of life deviod of the old ideals. He is insecure, anxious, tense and sceptical. He sits on the edge of the world, waiting to be thrown into the painful vortex of agonising experiences because of the tremendous power of the political systems which he belongs to. Agastya Sen, the antiheroic protagonist of the novel English, August: An Indian Story is a victim of the bureaucratic system he comes to join. Coupled with it is his selfish careerism which again attests to the excessive power exercised by an impersonal culture of comfort lovingness and material advancement in life. As against that,
the protagonists of the novel of authors like Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan had belonged to a secure world where eternal reality stood by to ultimately dominate the temporary vicissitudes of life. But what one finds in English, August as well as in Clear Light of Day, The Circle of Reason, Shame, Midnight’s children, Plans for Departure, Yatra, etc, is the human beings buffeted helplessly by the unfeeling social world which they encounter. These novels lack the staidness, solemnity and self-consciousness that once characterised the Indian English novel. This lack reflects the changes which have come about in the life of Indians. They are uninhibited; they are neither idealistic nor sentimental. They express the deep urge of the protagonist to speak out, unfettered by restraints. The shaking off of the traditional hiccups about materialistic enjoyment marks the life of the period of 1980s of which Upamanyu Chatterjee’s Agastya sen is a prominent representative. Spiller rightly thinks that fiction represents ‘the Controlling temper and ideas of (its) time and place’ (ibid.). Meenakshi Mukherjee, the noted Indo- Anglian critic, in her Twice-Born Fiction argues in the same vein by the force of her position that the 1930s Indian English novels show concern with national and social problems, and 1960s is preoccupied with the individual’s quest for a personal meaning in life. One can argue in tandem that the 1980s represents the individual’s predicament of finding himself painfully close to losing one’s freedom.

Agastya Sen, the antihero, represents his time, i.e., the last quarter of the twentieth century Indian urban life at multiple levels. In being a ‘mean sensual man’ (Williams 187) he stands for the sexual permissiveness rising its ugly head in the urban-metropolitan Indian
life under the influence of western toxic cultural influences. This permissiveness is linked to the idea of popularly assumed good life symbolised by materialistic amenities and enjoyment. Shobha De, an author and columnist concentrating on urban Indian life has tried to take an accurate snap of the modern urban Indian mindscape in her article ‘Ruling Fantasies’. She writes:

While we in India do not have the exact equivalent of a J. Lo (Jennifer Lopez) on our popular culture map, the fact remains that today’s urban Indian can and does identify completely with what Jennifer is saying—all the contradictions of the essential message notwithstanding....‘Want’ is the key. Everybody wants more. And if that is not accurately reflected in the media, it is because of the cultural baggage inbuilt into our psyches. (De 16)

The emergence of a new elite, powerful and assertive, is invariably accompanied by a new cultural style which suits its taste but irks the tradition-bound persons. In the Indian context, the growing industrialisation, urbanisation over the last century, more so in the decades after independence, has irretrievably altered us as a culture and people. It has inevitably led to a shift towards an individualistic urban bent of mind devoted to a careeristic urge to go up at the cost of those unfortunate ones left behind in the race. It has come in the wake of the dismemberment of the traditional cohesion based on fellow-feeling and sympathy with the entire society. Despite the enduring imagery of India as a land of villages, over a third of our population lives in cities and probably as many in semi-urban areas. The
novel *English, August: An Indian Story* reflects, through the characters of Agasty Sen, Dhruoo, Madan, Govind, etc, the image of that India which sees cities as the heaven where her rising aspirations will find fulfilment. This is the India of the young which is at the centre of the creative efforts of Upamanyu Chatterjee whose chief concern is to hold a mirror up to this class. We may be an old civilization but our population is young. It is impatient, mobile, far more willing to break out of the confines of tradition in its search for opportunities to make good. Fewer of Indians today live in joint families and many more women, traditionally kept out of the labour market, work in a variety of occupations. Agastya’s disregard for the advice of his father reveals an accentuated version of the crumbling structure of the institution of family; likewise, the situation of Agastya’s girlfriend Neera reflects the liberation of Indian urban woman.

The Antihero-Bureaucracy Interface

In an attempt to highlight the rootedness in the time of creation of the Indian English novels of the 1980s, a critic rightly remarks that ‘Politics-national and international-is their most important theme, and the displaced, marginal modern man their favourite protagonist (Kirpal xvi). The novel *English, August: An Indian Story*, with its antiheroic protagonist Agastya Sen, fits in quite well with this assessment, as this work is a fine representative creative document of that decade. In this novel politics is particularised in its power over the individual in the form of the insensitive and corrupt bureaucracy. Agastya
Sen joins it as a highly placed official. Through the corrupt and depraved bureaucracy is cogently reflected that moment in the Indian history when the relationship between the government and the people at large gets ruptured and this rupture tragically tilts against them. Repression and insensitivity become the hallmarks of the politico-bureaucratic system. The purpose of public service, formally enshrined in the structure of the bureaucracy becomes an empty slogan devoid of any human touch. It turns into a world of babudom which drowns in a deluge of forms and files. Here one finds an obscure hierarchy of officialdom making it impossible ever to find the man authorized to deal with a particular case. Here officials work overtime and yet get nowhere. Numberless interviews take place but never reaching to the situation which can be said to be to the point. In fact, the readers who are in the know of the way the Indian bureaucracy operates itself, feel that it is an excruciatingly familiar world, but reproduced by a creative intelligence which turns the tale of the insipid bureaucracy into a work of highly readable fiction. The theme of the Indian bureaucracy dehumanising its members is distinctly visible in the work of Upamanyu Chatterjee. It fascinates him because he was compelled to write a sequel, The Mammaries of the Welfare State, in order to give a fuller treatment to the theme. On being asked about his novel being autobiographical, he replied significantly,

That depends on what you mean by autobiography. But some of it is certainly my own experience, and there is a large part that has been inspired by the things that I have been told, read about, etc. (Chatterjee 1)
It shows that in grappling with an impersonal theme like the bureaucracy, the novelist does not depend on his personal experiences only, though he is a part of the higher echelon of it. He keeps himself open and receptive to the views and assessments of others.

What is obvious is that at the thematic centre of the twin novels lies the predicament of their protagonist. It is his antiheroic life which forms the hub of the entire sprawl of the novels. It can be said that the novel *English, August* is a close link in the chain of those artistic works of the 1980s which concern themselves with the protagonist’s inability to communicate. This inability to communicate is a reflection of the impotence they suffer from in the face of the power of the system they belong to. It is a feeling, on the part of the antiheroes like Agastya Sen, that they are impotent vis-a-vis the bureaucratic world they do not want to live in. It is a crippling despair at having lost to forces too powerful to combat. They are little men lost in the web of petty interests and concerns. They prove the point that the hero, as once understood in classical literature, has disappeared from modern realistic literature, conspicuously so from the literature which has dominated the literary world since the middle half of the last century. His place has been taken by the entity popularly called the antihero who is obverse of the image of the hero. It is the antihero who dominates the novel, he is at the centre of the actions that take place in the novel. Taking the two novels *English, August* and *The Mammaries* as a single corpus devoted to the exploration of the antiheroic protagonist and his morally grey, airless and cheerless world, the novelist
remarks, 'According to me, Agastya Sen is the tapeworm... the linking factor in the book' (Chatterjee). It is sufficient to prove the point that though on the surface it is the cold impersonal world of the outward politics which seems to be visible all over, the core of the novel is constituted by the sufferings and agony of the antihero, the agony sometimes felt but often remaining unfelt because it is one of the dimensions of his antitheroic situation that he does not understand the real state of his existence. This dimension represents the modern mind, seemingly self-sufficient, intelligent, sceptical and splendidly trained through modern education for the game of pretending that the world it comprehends is the only reality, the irony being that it does not understand its own state of happiness or unhappiness and the cause behind it. All Agastya Sen does is to envy in utter incomprehension the easy-going, free of care approach to life evinced by those people who are not so educated and rich. He does not understand the existential fact that happiness comes through the door of the commitment to a purpose, not from being highly placed in the bureaucratic hierarchy or having much wealth. But in one corner of his mind he feels envious of those who are happy, but finds himself simultaneously restrained from falling to an 'inappropriate' level. The following authorial comment sums up his plight he finds himself in when coming face to face with an ordinary salesman of medicines in his doctor friend's clinic:

He was suddenly ashamed of himself, looking at the salesman, talking about medicines for twelve hours a day, his restlessness seemed awfully frivolous. The salesman made him feel both eerie and guilty—be happy you are not him, and how dare you behave so cheaply
when you have the chance not to be him (224).

Likewise, in the remote backward village which he visits as a government official, the tribal simplicity and bravery in the face of hardships of life ‘make him feel, yet again, absurd, or guilty. They irritated him, almost to the point of anger;...’(259). The inability to comprehend makes communication impossible. Agastya Sen is a person who understands neither himself nor the world and its people around him. He is alienated from everyone he is required to deal with. He cannot connect himself with anyone at a meaningful level of relationship. In fact, he is not one person, but plays the roles of different persons at different places and situations. His personality reflects that class of anglicized Indian urban youth who, owing to their educational training, have become aliens in their own land. They are the people who have been unhinged from their roots and, consequently, rendered unhappy and restless. This unhappiness and restlessness is born out of the unrestrained desire for materialistic progress which has taken the youth under its grip, depriving them of all moving ideals of morality and service. In their inexorable thrust for material advancement they philosophise that in the world ‘... there is nothing such as absolute honesty, there are only degrees of dishonesty’(138) It vividly reflects the amoral temper of the time.

Lack of Motivation Toward Ideals.

August considers himself as one ‘with no special aptitude for anything’(3). He suffers
from dislocation, lambent dullness, alienation and boredom. He gets so engrossed in his personal petty dilemmas that there is no space left for him to think of those whom he is supposed to serve, administer and lead as an IAS officer, and thinks eloquently,

'I don't look like a bureaucrat, what am I doing here? I should have been a photographer or a maker of ad films, something like that, shallow and urban' (13).

After joining the coveted Indian Administrative Service, he has been posted to Madna, a small place of the hinterland of India. His father, himself a governor of an Indian state, advises him about the opportunity of serving the masses while living as an IAS at Madna. The father gives him some nuggets of advice about the efficacy and joy of serving the poor and the marginalised fellow Indians. He says that his son would complete his life experience by observing the differences between Delhi and Madna. Life is practical enrichment through experience and service, so Agastya's father thinks and wants his son to think. The father is a symbol of the by-gone era when service was an essential condition of being a public servant. A link was sought to be made between the fortune of service and a place among the gods in heaven. It was an exalted experience to be given the space and opportunity of being among those who needed service and care. That tradition of service and sacrifice has been broken into dead strategies and tactics of self-service and self-aggrandisement through the means of landing highly paid and power giving jobs. Agastya, being devoid of idealistic feelings sees the system he joins in this way. He is not an innocent man in search of experience. Arun Joshi's Ratan Rathor, the antiheroic protagonist of The Apprentice, is
ultimately sucked up into the vortex of corruption and seediness of bureaucratic life, but
only after being passing through the state of wonder at what actually prevails around him,
away from his cloistered ideals. Ratan has an appropriate intertextual affinity with Agastya
because like the latter he is also the son of a man who believes in the still relevant efficacy
of time honoured values of selfless service and sacrifice for the larger social good. Ratan
falls to the level of accepting bribes which compromise the security of his nation. Agastyas
also shirks his responsibilities as a public servant. The contrast between the two lies in
Agastya's being a selfish disbeliever in human and social ideals from the very beginning.
Here we get an idea of the distance which the Indian antiheroic character has covered in a
span of about a decade and a half. It points to the fact of the fast changes which have occurred
in the Indian society, especially the Indian youth. For them, the tradition nurtured by high
ideals of public service lies shattered by the weight of selfish considerations. The role of
'modern education' in disintegrating this tradition is suspect in the eyes of a creative realist
like Upamanyu Chatterjee. Another significant novelist, Rohinton Mistry, hints amply to
this situation when one of his characters remarks,

This was the bloody problem with modern education. In the name of progress, they
discarded seemingly unimportant things without knowing (that) what they were chucking
out of the window of modernity was tradition. And if tradition was lost, then the loss of
respect for those who respected and loved tradition always followed (Mistry 61).
In the novel *English, August: An Indian Story* Upamanyu Chatterjee appears as creatively perspicacious and full of penchant for irreverence for what was earlier considered untouchable, immoral or low according to the literary canon of creative work. He has extirpated many taboos pertaining to theme, its treatment and language. It was expected of a novelist writing in the post-Rushdie era of Indian writing in English. What is most noteworthy is the fact that it is the anti-heroic protagonist who lends a uniquely discernible dimension to this novel. It is quite interesting to see how this different hero fares in a world that is not 'his' own. He is named after Agastya who is, as he himself explains, 'a saint of the forest in the Ramayana, very ascetic. He gives Ram a bow and arrow. He's there in the Mahabharata too. He crosses the Vindhyas and stops them from growing'(4). This allusion Agastya Sen, IAS gives out as a dead piece of information. It appears from his tone that he is enumerating the shapes and sizes of things kept in his cupboard. On the surface, this protagonist defies a distinct categorization. Rather, this surface difficulty at his categorization is technically significant in giving a mock twist to his identity as a curious blending of properties of various categories of protagonists. He is a hybrid hero. Like a classical hero, he was brought up by surrogate parents-aunt and uncle. He is of mixed religion. His father is a Bengali Hindu who married a Goanese Christian woman, but allowed his son to remain a Hindu and named him accordingly. This shows the definite intention on the part of his father to ground him in the cultural moorings of his religious tradition. The father recognises the catholicity of Hinduism which allowed him a transreligious marriage without disturbing his stability as a consistent Hindu. He holds that this religion is essentially great because it
embraces diversities of social and intellectual thinking and keeps in its fold even the divergences. He says without any tinge of irony or sarcasm, ‘You can think and do what you like and still remain a Hindu’ (56). Further, Agastya is endowed with some attributes of the classic hero. The son of a Governor of an Indian state, a high bred well-educated person, he is himself an IAS officer. Chatterjee being a novelist who grounds his narrative of anti-heroic condition of the modern Indian youth in the concrete context of the power that is popularly attached to the status of high administrative government jobs, Agastya may approximately be called a modern version of an Indian prince who wields enormous power and prestige and thereby enjoys a prominent place in the obtaining social structure of the country. The acronym ‘IAS’ becomes his virtual surname and a synonym for him.

Misfit and Anchorless

The agonising existential problem with Agastya Sen, IAS, is that he is aware of his being a misfit and without any anchorage in his role as a public servant. He considers himself as unhinged and misplaced, and does not enjoy the role and position he has earned by virtue of his qualifications. He finds happiness neither in the collectorate nor in the circuit house, neither among his colleagues nor while he is alone. He seems to be misbegotten in a world which he does not seems to fit in. He is dissatisfied with the contemporary culture, its standards and its mores which are perennially being imposed by its corrupt agents on creatures living with listlessness. Agastya’s story of anchorless agony does not begin in Madna. It has its root in his life in Delhi where he was an aspirant for his coveted job of IAS.
Cut off from his roots, life for Agastya in Delhi is an endless trip of boozing, doing soft drugs and sex. But this fails to relieve his sense of exile; a hovering miasma of dissatisfaction and dislocation engulfs him constantly. By opting for the IAS he hopes to find some meaning and purpose to his rudderless life. Dr. Upadhyay, his professor at the college wishes him a happy future life as a public servant. His status as an administrator will, hopefully, provide him a more meaningful context with possibilities of fulfilment. But life in Madna proves to be no different. The authorial comment of Upamanyu Chatterjee sums up his anti-heroic condition:

Anchorlessness—that was to be one of his chaotic concerns in that uncertain years; battling a sense of waste was to be another. Other fodder too, in the farrago of his mind, self pity in an uncongenial clime, the incertitude of his reactions to Madna, his job, and his inability to relate to it—other abstractions too, his niche in the world, his future, the elusive mocking nature of happiness, the possibility of its attainment (24-25).

Agastya Sen suffers from an inexorable sense of exile, and this feeling of exile is produced in him by an acute awareness of his colonial legacy, the two mutually opposed traditions he has been a heir to. He is an Indian by birth and his geographical location, but at the level of psychic make-up he is a child fathered by the values of the West. His situation brings to mind a similar sounding predicament of James Baldwin who tries to examine his own situation as an American negro:

I know, in any case, that the most crucial time in my own development came when I was
forced to recognize that I was a kind of bastard of the west. When I followed the line of my past I did not find myself in Europe, but in Africa and this meant that in some subtle way, in a really profound way, I brought to Shakespeare, Bach, Rembrandt, to the stones of Paris, to the Cathedral of Chartres, and to the Empire State Building, a special attitude. These were not really my creations, they did not contain my history; I might search in them in vain forever for any reflection of myself; I was an interloper. At the same time I had no other heritage which I could possibly hope to use. I had certainly been unfitted for the jungle or the tribe (Baldwin 14).

The anchorlessness of Agastya does not allow him to feel positive protest and anger towards the corruption and seediness which he finds in his colleagues, work of place and the system of government functioning. He does not try to revolt against what prevails around him, rather he becomes a part of that. He does understand that there is much that is amiss in the bureaucratic system he has joined, but he has no willingness to try for a change in what is not desirable. An illustrative example is his reaction after learning about the Monthly Revenue officers Meeting. His first mental response to it is how to escape from it. The obvious course open to him is to pretend sickness, but his pettiness and cunningness lead him to a fear of being found out by the controlling officer, Shrivastava. Agastya is a symbol of indecision and procrastination. It is notable that the decision to be an IAS is not his own; it is his father, Madhusudan Sen, who wanted to see his son in the service of the common people as a highly placed administrator. So, from the very beginning, the inner urge, which
should be the basic motive for any success in some chosen domain of action, is absent. He does not believe in his work; rather, he wants to escape from the ‘prison’, but not in a resolute way, just as a matter of procrastination. He postpones his decision. For example, before taking his new assignment at Koltanga (after completion of training at Madna) he desires to go to Calcutta for holidays and is utterly without a sense of finality about coming back. He is weak in his resolution, and consequently, achieves nothing in life which can fulfil him as a personality. Matthew Arnold in his poem ‘Scholar Gipsy’ points out the reasons for man’s failure in life which aptly explain the condition of an anti-hero like Agastya who symbolises that of the modern Indian youth of the post independence India, particularly the India of the later decades of the twentieth century. Arnold writes:

...We,

Like half-believers of our casual creeds, who never deeply felt, nor clearly will’d,

Whose insight never has borne fruit in deeds,

Whose vague resolves never have been fulfill’d.

(Quiller-couch 919)

Unlike Agastya and as a pointer to the difference of substance in the respective time, the Scholar Gipsy could succeed in life because he had ‘one aim, one business, one desire’ which Agastya lack.

Our non-hero constantly feels that he is living somebody else’s life, for he finds no coherence between his past and present life or even the three spheres of his human existence—the official, the unofficial and the private of his confused life. This chasm between
thought and action, private and public life compels him to define himself, his own identity, and to his great discomfort, realises that he is totally confused about what he wants in life or how he could find a way out of his vague restlessness. Two possible methods of coping with his confusion and discontent offer themselves to Agastya: the rational method of Marcus Aurelius, and the Karmic acceptance advocated by the Bhagwad Gita. Marcus' Meditations was a parting gift from his father and the Gita is lent to him by Madna's cartoonist friend, Govind Sathe. He reads both books in snatches and initially finds it tempting to relate his situation to that of Marcus: 'In those months he grew to like immensely this wise sad Roman. Marcus immediately made him feel better, because Marcus seemed to have more problems than anyone else-not the soul-squashing problems of being poor, but the exhilarating abstract problems of one immersed wholly in his self' (69). He even starts maintaining a diary in which, like Marcus, he records his meditations. The Gita, on the other hand, begins with a handicap for him—as a mark of his intellectual shallowness nurtured by his deculturation he had always associated it with old age when the after life begins to look important. He is startled to discover in it serious reflections on restlessness which he thinks is an exclusive predicament of his generation. But ultimately neither Marcus nor the Gita matters for him. The authorial comment of the novelist catches Agastya's frame of thinking in these words,

The meditations of the author of the Gita and Marcus Aurelius were far away, and sometimes even false. For he came to believe that whoever could have made the effort to
write down all those things could not have felt them with any intensity. Yet he had loved those lines once.... Now he felt that those were far too many words to use to express any genuine longing for emptiness (135).

It is natural to view Agastya as a misfit in the rat race of the world. His anchorlessness is representative of a generation of 'cultural cripples' who have 'missed the momentous, the most dramatically significant years, the first five decades of our Century' (229-30). He belongs to 'the cola generation-the generation that doesn't oil its hair' (47), 'the generation of apes' (28) and the generation that would 'love to get AIDS just because it's raging in America' (76). Agastya's being the son of a Bengali Hindu father and a Goan Catholic mother seems to be an additional factor in rendering him a cultural mongrel. What is another additional factor is that his mother died of meningitis when he was less than three years of age. It may have an effect on his growth which might have been not so smooth at least in emotional terms. Feelings of alienation and rootlessness have multiple roots in the case of Agastya. What is important is that his non-conformity, his discontent despite success in material terms make him a natural member of the large family of existential heroes encountered in the novels not only of Camus, Kafka and Sartre but also Arun Joshi, Nagarkar and Mukhopadhyaya Western existential heroes naturally 'belonged' to the 1960s-the decade of counter culture, of marijuana and Pinko revolution, of rebellion and Flower power, of barricades, Beatles and Rolling Stones. These phenomena were raging in the West at a time when the western youth passed through a phase of angst, alienation and incertitude. The socio-cultural establishment had become exhausted in its power to satisfy the new generation
of rising aspirations. These phenomena gave to the then youth a non-conforming identity and a certitude. They felt that they were different to the old guard establishment, its mores and values. This feeling of difference and non-conformity satisfied the youth of the West who happened to live at the particular civilizational hour of the Western Culture.

The title of the novel English, August: An Indian Story is significantly self-revealing. This work primarily focuses on the protagonist, but the rays of the focus bring within their illuminating range the entire generation to which the protagonist belongs. August soon discovers that feelings of dislocation, rootlessness and alienation are not his problems alone but of the whole generation which, to use his father’s words, ‘does not oil its hair (24). Dhrubo, who has been to Yale for his Ph.d. and has a job with the Citibank in Delhi feels that he has been living an unreal life and is tired of it. He reflects, ‘All those expense accounts and false-accented secretaries, and talk of New York and head office, and our man in Hong Kong, it’s just not real, it’s an imitation of something else-where....On weekends I see a Herzog film, or a Carlos Saura, it’s...unreal’ (153). Renu, Dhrubo’s girl friend who is now in Illinois, suffers from a sense of acute dislocation and wonders why she ever left India. Madan, another denizen of the anti-heroic world, feels deeply ashamed of his sister who is going to Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship and has acquired phony accents and manners. A bastard of the West, this generation certainly is. The common hallmark of this generation is the deculturation which is responsible for its inability to connect itself with the life around itself, despite all the education it has received and all the intelligence which it claims
to possess. The begetter of this common hall-mark is the English education. Quite significantly, the transformation of the name of the eponymous protagonist-from Agastya to August-is appropriated by the Western discourse. What is more significant than the surface etymology of this transformation is the willingness of the namebearer to go in a gung-ho way for this change. The massive British ideological project to resubjectify the natives got its success in this symbolic act of onomastic transformation. It reflects the inner state and the resultant trauma suffered constantly by the anti-heroic Agastya Sen who wished ‘... he had been Anglo-Indian, that he had Keith or Alan for a name, that he spoke English with their accent’(2). Gauri Viswanathan notes that ‘The English education was introduced in India with an object to achieve and maintain political domination. through cultural hegemony, by discreetly introducing western values and perceptions among the natives and moulding them as subjects’ (Viswanathan 18). So confident was Macaulay of the success of his education project of mental control and disorientation that he wrote, 'No Hindu who has received an English education, ever remains sincerely attached to his religion... It is my firm belief that if our plans of education are followed up, there will not be a single idolator among the respectable classes in Bengal thirty years later’(Mathew 15). Agastya, along with his fellow denizens of the world he inhabits, is a product of this ‘plans of education’ and upbringing.

The focus of Upamanyu Chatterjee in the novel English, August: An Indian Story is on the fact that the urban Indians like August are victims of an alien cultural discourse
which has been internalised by them in the course of their educational cultural nurturing. A famous Indian critic, Tabish Khair, in his *Babu Fictions: Alienation in Contemporary Indian English Novels* emphasises the point that English language and the education imparted through that language has the effect of constituting a subject. By implication, August and his ilk have been ‘discursively constituted’ by the education they have received. And this became the cause of their alienation. Within the alienating effect of English, as adumbrated by Khair, comes even the creative writer who writes novels in this language. He relevantly observes, ‘...the discursively constituted subject will be alienated in a situation where discourses related to or emanating from the subject’s positioning in the socio-economic field are (experienced as) subordinated to discourses from other/ dominant positions in the field’ (Khair 26). Alienation has a triple aspect—it is a process of estrangement from a natural socio-cultural context, it is a condition arising as a result of such an estrangement, and it is the subjective experience of being in such a condition. This triple aspect translates into an existential condition in which powerlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation, normlessness and self-estrangement become the distinguishing marks of the alienated individuals who are called anti-heroes.

The Antihero— the Failed Intellectual

In a proper consideration of a novel like *English August: An Indian Story*, it is quite significant to note that this acutely reality conscious work brings out, through its fictional
strength, the decay and death of the power conventionally attached with educated and intelligent persons. It is notable that the universe depicted in this novel is almost exclusively peopled by educated, in popular perceptions highly educated, persons. They are the bright products of their cherished educational system. They are District Magistrates, Superintendents of Police, Revenue officers, journalists, and other fillers in the hierarchical holes of their society. They are, conventionally speaking, intellectuals. But their being intellectual has failed them in their life leaving them intellectuals only in name. They are, as their representative August feels, with no special aptitude for anything, not even wondering how to manage, not even thinking. Chinua Achebe’s novel *No Longer At Ease* grapples with an identical problem, i.e., the problem of the alienation of the intellectual from his native moorings. Its protagonist Obi Okonkwo passes his senior Cambridge School Certificate examination topping in the whole district, goes to England for higher education, and joins the Nigerian civil service after his return from England. But he fails to understand his surroundings and therefore fails to relate himself to the society of which he is an ostensible member. He is self-willed, highly individualistic and utterly confused about what is meant by love for his own nation and its people. He even writes a sentimental, derivative pseudo-patriotic poem about Nigeria while away in England, but never thinks deeply and seriously about the socio-economic and political problems facing his country or what is the deeper meaning of the colonial rule. His views on corruption in the country are childish. He is unable to probe the root cause of the evil and degenerates into accepting bribes. What binds Obi Okonkwo and Agastya Sen is the fact that both are, as veritable representatives of their
respective generations, passive intellectuals in a state of anomie. A great damage has been done to them by the education they have received which made them deficient in the understanding of the ethos to which they belong, and rendered them self-indulgent. Education has made them identify with the western way of life, and think that the western civilization embodied progress and advancement. The foundation of this alienating training and education is laid in the very beginning of the construction of the coveted structure. Professor Nissim Ezekiel has perceptively pointed out in his review of the novel English, August in the Indian Post of August 21, 1988, 'It is Agastya’s Darjeeling school that established his alienation, of which he remains conscious virtually throughout this ‘Indian Story’ (Raykar: 111). English, August: An Indian Story, unlike Achebe’s No Longer At Ease, is set in Independent India—India of the 1980s, while the latter novel deals with the Nigerian society of the 1950s. What makes the two reflect at each other is the theme of the state of anomie the intellectuals face as a result of colonization.

The anomie of the intellectual easily translates itself into a mental state in which the intellectual lives without freedom and a sense of personal responsibility. Agastya Sen always feels that he is living someone else’s life, that he is not free, that he is not happy. He finds corruption, immorality, seediness, lack of concern with the plight of the down trodden all around himself, but he is not able to resist the negative power of all these things to overwhelm him, and turn him into a man who always wants to escape into the privacy of his room and indulge in masturbation and marijuana. He is not able to transcend the tyranny of facts.
rather he is crushed under the heavy weight of his facticity. His inner spirit, the well of positive inner resources, is deadened. He wants to get freedom from the clutter of noises going on constantly in his mind, but is powerless to realize that the power to transcend those noises lies in himself. He suffers from an acute syndrome of mental staticity, he has fixed himself in a rut of stereotyped responses to emerging situations. It can be said that his situation has enslaved him. It does not cross his mind that people are responsible for what they make of themselves, no matter what the external conditions. Civilizational struggles of humanity against the dark forces of anti-human status quoism bear witness to the fact that humans of positive thinking have always gathered themselves in the face of dire odds. It is true that one is never free of one's situations, but one is always free to negate that situation and try to change it. The anti-heroic thinking of Agastya Sen does not allow the thought that to be truly human is to be free to imagine, free to choose, and responsible for one's life. He is an existential failure. He is desperate for happiness. He is honest enough to realize that the condition of his being happy is to keep his mind free from remembrances and prognostications, but his lack of control over the wayward workings of his mind renders him spiritually impotent. It makes his predicament poignant. He is desperate to be and remain his own self but is bogged down into the memories centred on others. He is unable to shake off the memories of the past which come flooding back to him. He thinks with a tinge of misery that 'he could even make do with Madna,...if his mind would not burgeon with the images of Delhi, or of Calcutta,...and beyond that Singapore where everything was ordered, and Illinois.
with its infinite varieties of ham. It was convulsing, the agony of the worlds in his head’ (177).

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

The predicament of Upamanyu Chatterjee’s Agastya Sen is more anti-heroic than Arun Joshi’s Som Bhaskar. This intensified anti-heroism lies in the fact that Agastya, unlike Som, is preoccupied with petty issues of day to day life of his, like food, sex, marijuana, mosquito, and in finding escape routes from official engagements. Som’s preoccupations are with more serious issues of life, like religious faith, belief in God as the creator of man, the possibility of knowledge and the efficacy of the scientific approach to life and its problems. He does take recourse to tranquillisers, women and liquor as momentary cures for his insomnia at the physical level, but his real tragedy lies elsewhere. He would have
moved as smoothly on his obsessions with money, business and fame as a wheel on ballbearings had it not been for the analytical, rational mind developed through the years. The major temptation he had succumbed to was a deep-rooted desire to know everything in life, ranging from the outcome of his business shares to the outcome of man's belief in God. His tragedy is that anything that cannot be known or logically conceived does not exist for him. And hence his mental unrest. The unrest of Agastya Sen arises from the utter lack of control over his carnality and a desire for such life where there is no responsibility. He wants to live the life of a parasite. We get a sense of the absurd when we learn that, while at school, he had written, as an expression of his ambition of life, that he wanted to be a street dog! He had searched himself and wrote that his real ambition was to become "a domesticated male stray dog because they lived the best life. They were assured of food, and because they were stray they didn't have to guard a house or beg or shake paws or fetch trifles or be clean or anything similarly meaningless to earn their food" (35). This is the lowest depth one could fall to, considering the fact that Agastya was at that time in the process of getting on the path of a bright future career, at least popularly perceived bright career. He is incapable of review and introspection, because he cannot dare go for divergent thinking. He represents that class of intellectuals who are lonely and suffer from the absence of communication, not only with the without but also the within.

The man whose ambition was to be assured of food without having 'to guard a house' joins the highest echelon of the Indian bureaucracy- The Indian Administrative Service.
It is not without significance that Agastya Sen, despite being a student of English literature, decides to follow the consent of the prevailing societal preference for the job in the Indian Administrative Service. The concept of anti-hero as we find in Chatterjee’s *English, August: An Indian Story* reflects very sharply on the pathological careerism of modern Indian youth. This careerism appears basically as a feudal preference for positions of power and control over those compatriots who are ill-fated to live a life of dependence on the mai-baap style of administrative dispensation by the government machinery. The ideals of public service and commitment to duty are things as unimaginable as fish on a metalled road. In fact, the bureaucratic world, as very satirically portrayed in this novel, is an outward extension of the anti-heroic restless predicament of the rootless and alienated psyche of those who have happened to occupy their coveted chairs. This predicament manifests itself in mutual jealousy among the officers, petty acts of snobbishness on their part, their urge for exploitation of their subordinates, and their wives’ desire to flaunt the status of their husbands. It all appears as if after the white sahibs departed for their homes across the seas the brown sahibs filled their places. Agastya’s insights into the IAS find an echo in every Indian heart acquainted with this legacy of the Raj:

District administration in India is largely a British creation, like the railways and the English language, another complex and unwieldy bequest of the Raj. But Indianization (of a method of administration, or of a language) is integral to the Indian story. Before 1947 the
The Collector's attempt to enhance his image through habitual unpunctuality goes hand in
hand with his public's grovelling attitude to him. It thanks itself for being in long wait for its
master. The satiric bite of the novelist exposes the hideous banality of the officers' official
life. They are so banal in their enjoyment of power and superiority that their exploitative
acts of using their official facilities, both in men and things, seem to them as natural as
night after day. They use their office peons for doing their domestic chores. Upamanyu
Chatterjee's depiction of the world of highly placed bureaucrats presents a situation in
which a total subversion of values has taken place, taking within its ambit even those who
are not so highly placed. The entire society itself appears out of joint. Here peons do not
resent their exploitation, rather they covet it. 'Many coveted the job, preferring to clear the
shit of the progeny of a Collector's than to shuttle files in an office. Their priorities made
sense, for in the office the collector was a million rungs away, but at home, while they were
bringing him his shoes or taking away his slippers, they were close enough to grovel for

collector was almost inaccessible to the people; now he keeps open house...even though
he still exhibits old accoutrements (but now Indianized) of importance - the flashing orange
on the roof of the car, the passes for the first row at the sitar recital, which will not start
until he arrives and for which he will not arrive until he has ensured by telephone that
everyone else who has been invited has arrived first. In Madna, as in all of India, one's
importance as an official could be gauged by how long one could keep a concert (to which
one was invited) waiting (10).
their desires...'(57). Here is a world turned upside down, a world suffering from what might be called a variation of the Stockholm Syndrome which causes the captives to love their captors. The tormented love the tormentors. The exploited lackeys do not understand the real text of their relationship with their exploiters. Through it, the world of Upamanyu Chatterjee looks devoid of any possibility of countering the antiheroic.

One very important aspect of the novel **English, August** is the message that the Indian society did not undergo cultural decolonization. The hard and cold truth underlying and emanating from its satirical facade is that modern Indian youth worship the values bequeathed to them by the colonial history. The bureaucratic alienation from the unwashed Indian masses is due to the internalization of the colonial sense of superiority on the part of the Indians. The constant desire of Agastya Sen, IAS, for independence of mind and the resultant happiness is ironic, considering his realization that he cannot connect himself significantly with the people he is meant to serve as a public servant. This is the 'fatal flaw' of his existence as a human being constricted by his past and present, his past studentship imbued with the blind inculturation of western values and his present as a highly placed Indian public servant posted in one of the backward regions of the country. The contrast between Agastya and Madna becomes a powerful metaphor for the alienated relationship between the class of bureaucrats and the mass of Indians whom they have been asked to serve. The unmistakable message of the novel is the suggestion that what is called Indian civil service is neither Indian nor civil. Salman Rushdie likes the novel **English, August: An Indian Story** for what
he calls ‘the elegant social observation of Upamanyu Chatterjee’ (Rushdie: 172). The reach and scope of the realistic snapshots of Chatterjee are so wide that he was creatively compelled to write a sequel of English, August, which was published in 2000. He titled this sequel The Mammaries of the Welfare State, a title pregnantly suggestive of the actions the so called public servants of India can indulge in. This novel can be called an exclusive canvas on which the milieu of bureaucratic political rottenness lie portrayed in full blazon, the novel English, August being a work which concentrates more on the mind than on the milieu. Even then, it has its own share of Stendhalian realism which brings the day-to-day routine seediness and rot of the bureaucratic Indian life in sharp focus.

Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister had described the Indian Civil Service (ICS) as ‘the steel frame’ of the British empire in India. The introduction of the competitive examinations in the fifties of the nineteenth century largely eradicated the spoils system in the superior British Indian services. There was a time when lack of integrity was seldom laid at its door even by the most bitter critic of the British regime. For the existence, functioning and progress of independent India, it was thought by our founding fathers that India’s ability to tolerate the inevitable depredations of democracy in its infancy needed to be substantially assisted. This was sought to be provided by the subconscious confidence that somewhere just below the newly elected masters there existed a steel frame that could be relied on to ensure that the more things change the more they remain the same. It was assumed that the prior-existing structure of administrative command and control, renamed
Indian Administrative Service (IAS), would provide the substantive elements of comforting continuity. Besides, it was believed that it would meet the new challenges of free India and give a new direction to the country. In other words, its assigned and expected role was to guide the destiny of the nation and to take it to the heights of peace, progress and prosperity without sacrificing the dignity and freedom of the individual. The post of an IAS was highly coveted and respected. In fact, that was the first preference of an educated youth in India, with a desire to serve the masses. It demanded intelligence, moral integrity and dedication to the cause of the nation. The glow of moral idealism and service of the nation in the initial years of independence attracted many committed members of the Indian youth and they joined the Indian Administrative Service. They upheld the tradition set in 1864 by Satyendranath Tagore (the first Indian to join the ICS)-the tradition to discharge the official duty according to the sanctity of the book of rules. Issues of complicity in the colonial design remains validly debatable, but as far as the tenets of administrative impartiality and selfless regard for one's duty were concerned, the pre-independence stalwarts like Satyendranath Tagore and Surendranath Bannerjee remain countervailing beacons of light to the anti-heroes like Agastya.

English, August: An Indian Story as an imaginative document maps in some starkly naturalistic details the decline that occurred in the IAS with the passage of time. The Service expected to be selfless became a vehicle for self-aggrandizement on the part of those who happened to man it. The collector of Madna, Srivastava, his predecessor, Mr. Antony, the
Superintendent of Police, Kumar, other officers, Bajaj and Menon—all together present, through their words and actions, an image of Indian steel frame which has rotten to the roots. One charge made against this novel is that it ‘seems to be competing with the Taluka office for tedium, documentary with relentless accuracy of every single syllable of the conversation of the self-satisfied and uninteresting bureaucrats who flock its pages’ (Rao 79). This charge is valid, but only at the superficial level. It is through the lived lives of ‘the self-satisfied and uninteresting bureaucrats’ that the real core of the anti-heroic banality of the modern Indian youth and life comes out in the novel with devastating power of Chatterjee’s fictional imagination whose source of sustenance is in our undeniable actualities. As we know from Allen Walter, most of the authors

‘betray their opinion on the characters and situations and—inasmuch as every novel is an extended metaphor of the author’s view of life on the life itself—they do so by the very choice of the characters they write about, the thoughts and feelings they give them, and the behaviour and motives they attribute to them’ (Walter 16-17).

The central opinion of Upamanyu Chatterjee in this novel is that the careerist English educated Indian urban youth suffers alienation at his deeper psychic level from his roots and becomes doomed to a life of unhappiness and boredom. It is from this unhappiness and boredom that he wants to escape but finds himself incapable of escaping. He lacks the will power and concentration of purposive action, so his destiny becomes an unending journey
in the search of happiness, a journey attended incessantly by failures. The failures destroy the unity of Agastya’s life. As an uprooted bureaucrat, his life is divided into three worlds— all split wide apart from each other. He has the official world, the private world and the secret world. In the secret world he succumbs to masturbation and marijuana, in the official world he remains absent from the various offices for long hours and absent-minded in some of the works he tries to engage himself with. In the private world he surprises everybody by accepting all invitations to dinners given by his decent and nice but inefficient friends and colleagues. At the end of his training he decides to opt out in favour of journalism, but Agastya is a man for whom decisive action for or against something is not an easy thing. When the sequel novel The Mammaries of the Welfare State came out, we learnt that he returned to continue as a bureaucrat living the unheroic life he began long ago in the first novel. But keeping in view his seeming decision to be a journalist, it can be said that it is an apt metaphor for his drifting, anchorless course of life. The contrast to Agastya’s sense of displacement is provided by an Englishman John Avery and his wife-to-be Sita, a South Indian girl whom he met in England. John has come to India in search of the place, Gorapak, where his grandfather, the Collector of Madna fifty years earlier, was mauled by a tiger. Agastya finds the whole idea of the visit quite bizarre.

Spiritual Dessication

The connecting bridge between Agastya and the fellow humanity has been completely
burnt down. He visits an ashram for lepers run by one Baba Ramanna, but remains unmoved by the selfless work he sees there. He goes to an Adivasi village near Gorapak and sees the plight of the poor villagers, suffering from an acute scarcity of water. He helps them mechanically by getting water tankers promptly, but is not able to feel any sympathy for the villagers. This is the real crisis of Agastya. He cannot connect himself with the outside world and so remains disjointed from his inner world. The Times Literary Supplement reviewer of the novel categorises Agastya's predicament as 'existential crisis', the solution to which is the 'Hindu belief in the virtue of self-knowledge and renunciation, and in a meditative and rhythmic life'(Williams) The term 'existential crisis' is conventionally contextualised in the decade of the 1960s, when for the western youth the norms of counter-culture and non-conformity were driving forces which gave a kind of identity and certitude. Then, non-conformity was a badge of authenticity vis-a-vis the hollowness of the values of the establishment. But in the fiercely careeristic ethos of the 1980s India (which lingers on and on), the ideology of rebellion and counter-authenticity lacks any force of substance. Opting out of the system is no longer an easily available alternative. There is uncertainty and confusion about the validity of non-conformity. It is this confusion that assails Agastya, the confusion of a man unhappy with the system but unsure whether the fault lies with him or with the system. Thus, to facilely diagnose Agastya's predicament as 'existential crisis' and to prescribe 'ancient Hindu wisdom' as antidote is to impose a certitude that is out of tune with the sensibility of the novel. Indeed, the TLS reviewer's statement that Agastya, by leaving the civil service, 'renounces security and privilege to return to the wisdom of his
father' is at best half-truth because the novel also suggests that he leaves a job that takes him away from the pleasures of metropolitan life. More than 'the wisdom of the father', it is the comforts of a life without responsibilities that draw him to Calcutta. All that he wants, Agastya often says to himself, is peace. What kind of peace? It comes out in his attempt at concreteness, 'I want to lie in the winter sun on the roof of the house in Delhi, or that decaying mansion in Behala, smoke, read a little, listen to a little music...' (136). He confesses more than once in the novel that he has no ambition. He realises that his needs are simple and unashamedly materialistic. He confesses, 'I don't want challenges or responsibility or anything, all I want is to be happy' (148).

Although it is tempting, partly because of the occasional passages from the Gita, to view Agastya's restlessness as the eternal disquietude of a man in search of a deeper knowledge of the self and the world, the novel does not make any attempt to cover up or falsify the mundane aspects of his discontent. It is the discontent of the outwardly powerful and inwardly impoverished generation of Indians, about whom Salman Rushdie beautifully gave away in his presentation at a P.E.N. conference, 'But the effects of the empire linger on. Those who were made powerful then remain, for the most part, powerful now' (Kirpal 112). English August: An Indian Story is a novel of powerful antiheroes, rendered pitiable weak at the core of their being. Their unhinging from the roots made them vulnerable to the fatal attraction of the glitz and conventional power attached with the pomp and glamour of worldly possessions. It is significantly reflected in the personalities of the
antiheroes that the shift towards an individualistic urban existence comes with its negatives—
anomie, rootlessness and growing violence. Many of the changes that we are experiencing,
primarily in urban India but also elsewhere, are disturbing. This novel of Upamanyu Chatterjee
is concerned with the spiritual crisis of the protagonist and through him the entire breed of
anglicized urban Indian youth who, having been trained in the false superiority of the western
materialistic ways, find themselves in a pit of mental suffering and self-hatred. We know
that Agastya’s predicament forms the care of not only English, August but also its sequal
The Mammaries. He is the ‘tapeworm’ (Chatterjee 4) running through the entire corpus of
the antiheroic saga of the lengthy drama enacted in the twin novels. It naturally follows that
the sordidness of fictional details lying scattered throughout the novel is just a symptom of
the spiritual agony that the antihero suffers. Agastya Sen suffers because he is split between
two divergent pulling factors which work at his psychic level. He has become amoral in his
orientation toward life and relationships under the pressure of his anglicized preferences
and careeristic thrust of his youth days. But somewhere deeper at his core he is sad; as
Upamanyu Chatterjee remarks in an online chat with a magazine, ‘My protagonist is God­
fearing and family-loving. He hates himself for casting dirty looks at a friend’s wife, mother,
etc’ (Chatterjee 2).

At the root of Agastya’s moral and spiritual crisis is his existential fact that by
education, intellectual training and approach to the desires of life he is anglicised, but at
the deeper level of his psyche his Indianess imbibed early in childhood in a traditional
Hindu home pulls him in its own direction. In him we have before us the modern mind, seemingly self-sufficient, intelligent and pretending non-chalantly that what it knows is the only version of reality, inner and outer. Yet, it is a mind which is, at a deeper level, torn between modern knowledge and traditional pulls. Thus, he is aware of two things, one on the surface and the other around his inner core of existence. He insisted once that one's nativity was not significant and hinted later that it must be preserved because it has a role at the deepest level of moral understanding. It is the case of intellect dreaming its dream of freedom, and the soul knowing its connectivity to the bondage. The predicament of Agastya Sen, the highly educated modern urban Indian, is such that there exists for him no transcendent order of things. What he perceives as order is established through the tidy relationship between things themselves. For him, the only conceivable order is positivist-scientific. He seeks release from the agony of the crude things and circumstances without being equipped with a higher perception of the reality beyond the apparent. He desires for the ability to be 'able to thrust aside and cast into oblivion every tiresome intrusive impression, and in a trice be utterly at peace' (135) but is doomed to fret 'under an anarchic mind' (144). It is his spiritual sterility which makes him desire oblivion about things of torment, whereas true spirituality demands their transcendence through right awareness. It seems that he lives in a world which has been sealed off against any transcendental whisperings. Its reason is that he does not accept the reality as it is, as a mere distorted shadow of a higher order of things. He lacks acceptance on his part of the reality, therefore his desire for transcendence (forgetfulness) is empty. He does not understand the Indian spiritual wisdom of getting
happiness and peace through the transformation of torture into bliss. Consequently, his mental situation becomes the predicament of a man who, endowed with an insatiable appetite for forgetfulness of agonising experiences, is constantly bombarded with precisely those very experiences. Thus he is caught in a vicious circle. He cannot accept the reality prevailing around him without first having to forget it, and he cannot forget it without first accepting it. His every contact with the world of reality, instead of being invigorating, becomes a source of pollution of his mind. Therefore, a possibility of interaction with reality becomes a mockery of interaction. The sight of a poorly clad tribal woman in a backward village evokes carnal desire in him, likewise the positive attitude of a medical salesman makes him livid with envy. The visit to the ashram of a genuine holy man leaves him untouched by any spiritual message toward life. His own petty interests of freedom from work and irksome rememberances chain him to his utterly miserable condition.

The core of Agastya Sen's spiritual dessication is his excessive preoccupation with his own self, his own pleasures, his own need to get rid of troublesome experiences. This preoccupation is highlighted through his obsession with food. Food—its availability and its suitability—is the central problem of Agastya Sen after he joins the Indian hinterland, i.e., Madna, as an IAS officer. He constantly enquires about his tea and breakfast; and 'was awed by the thought of months in which every meal would taste like this' (6). It confirms his utter phisicality and grossness in which the bliss of constructive engagement with the wider community is not possible. He suffers from extreme narcissism which mingles with his
lack of moral values. This mingling creates in him a void which makes his relationship with outside world his - father and uncle, his official responsibilities as a public servant, his colleagues and his girlfriend Neera-arid and life-denying, instead of life-affirming. He loses optimism and joy for life and constantly pines for freedom from boredom and monotony. He does not get success in his attempt to shed off the burden of the agony inflicted by his surroundings. Its real reason, a close reading of the text shows, is that he is object-referral, not self-referral. If he would have been self-referral, his internal reference point might have been his experience. He would have realized that underlying the painful diversity of life experiences is the unity of one all-pervasive spirit. But his antiheroic fate is such that he is always influenced by objects outside his self, which include situations, circumstances, people, and things. His thinking and behaviour are always in anticipation of a response. In this sense his life is fear-driven. We learn in the very beginning of the novel that Agastya is not satisfied with what he is; he is a destabilised person at the inner level. While at school 'he wished he had been Anglo-Indian, that he had Keith or Alan for a name, that he spoke English with their accent' (2). This destabilisation continues in his adult life, as, after joining the Indian bureaucracy as an IAS officer, he is assailed by an agonising sense of unreality - 'I don't look like a bureaucrat, what am I doing here' (13)? But he is particular about maintaining the facade of being a highly placed officer and a man who is 'English type' (23), because his internal reference point is his ego. His ego is, however, not what he really is. It is just his self-image, his social mask. It is the role he plays. This role thrives on others' approval, because it wants to control and is sustained by power as it lives
The spiritual impoverishment of Agastya Sen has made him too mediocre to look into the real causes of his predicament. As we know, mediocrity is not about being average, it is conforming to the average. For Agastya Sen, conforming to the average consumerist culture is the highest meaning in life. To fit in and succeed in society by whatever means and be happy has become the guiding motto of his life. That is why a condition of cultural stasis prevails inside him, whose one prominent symptom is his inability to read serious books. The novelist remarks characteristically:

Reading was impossible, with his mind in its state of quiet tumult, And the titles that had accompanied him from Calcutta and Delhi were almost laughable in their remoteness: two Bengali novels, Pather Panchali and Gora, neither of which could hold him because the problems of their protagonists were almost unapproachable, he always wanted something with immediacy... (68).

He is a victim of the culture of runaway consumerism and careerism which put him on a never ending, ever-accelerating treadmill of desire, its fulfilment and more desire. While remaining tied to this treadmill, he wants happiness. The famous cartographer of modern consciousness, Ken Wilber, diagnoses this disposition toward happiness as "simply pluralism infected with narcissism" (Wilber 35), meaning hyper-relativity about values and
acute self-centredness. It is giving ultimate priority to wanting to feel better, not by grounding the subjective self in a shared relationship with the suffering humanity, but by decontextualising it from the vortex of the hard realities of life. This self-centredness of Agastya Sen sits well with his lack of moral courage, imagination and idealism, turning him into nothing more than a machine careful of its consumer demands. The life of Agastya Sen in the sequel novel The Mammaries of the Welfare State shows that the antihero does not change the gear of his life.
Works Cited


2. Chatterjee, Upamanyu. *English, August: An Indian Story*. London: Faber and Faber, 1988. (All the references to the text are from this edition; the number in bracket is the page number).


