CHAPTER 2
ENGLISH, AUGUST: AN INDIAN STORY

Of the few novels that appeared in the Indo-English literature of the 1980s Upamanyu Chatterjee's English, August: An Indian Story (1988) ranks easily one of the best. It appears Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children (1981) which appeared in the beginning of the decade opened up new possibilities in subject matter and style. If Rushdie looks at Indian history in the pre and post-partition years with a critical eye, Upamanyu Chatterjee casts his eye on the contemporary Indian generation and the socio-economic conditions. The title of Chatterjee's novel has two parts "English, August" and "An Indian Story" the first of which suggests that the novel at once describes the colonial impact on Indian intelligentsia long after India became independent and the second part is about the exploitation and the backwardness of the country run by unwilling inefficient and unprepared...
bureaucracy. Taking the clue from the title this chapter discusses “English, August” first and then “An Indian Story” later.

*English, August: An Indian story* is an incisive, thinly masked autobiography of a sensitive Indian Administrative Officer called Agastya Sen. The novel describes the I.A.S. officer’s odyssey of self-discovery from the world of self-centered sensuality of music, musings, marijuana and masturbation to the world of substance of the reality of life through the encounters of social and political relations.

The novel predominantly exposes two important aspects. On the surface level, it is a commentary on the Indian Administrative Service: the corruption in high places, high-handedness, inefficiency, the oppression of the system, the utter indifference of the administration to the eradication of social evils, the acute class consciousness among the I.A.S. hierarchy, the little snobberies and petty jealousies.

The deeper level of the novel, *i.e.*, a frank discussion on the predicament in which an intelligent and educated modern youth finds himself. The young protagonist suffers from a sense of “dislocation” from all traditions and conventions which he finds meaningless. The novel as C. Sen Gupta observes is “a journey - pathetic, humorous, even
Before any appraisal of the novel, it is necessary to know in short the hero of the novel, Agastya Sen. He is a 24 year-old I.A.S. trainee posted to an Indian mofussil town of Madna. He is a product of mixed parentage. He is the only son of a Bengali father, who achieved high political office of the Governor and a Christian Goanese mother, who died of meningitis when he was less than three. He is a product of prestigious public schools at Darjeeling, Dehra Dun and Delhi.

The protagonist’s name “Agastya” itself arouses curiosity as it is that of a sage in the Hindu epics. And the hero himself explains: “He is a saint of the forest in the Ramayana, very ascetic. He gives Rama a bow and arrow. He’s there in the Mahabharata too. He crosses the Vindhyas and stops them from growing.” This of course is ironical because the protagonist is anything but ascetic.

In Chatterjee’s words Agastya belongs to the new Indian “Cola generation”, “the generation that doesn’t oil its hair”, “the generation of apes”, and the generation that would love “get AIDS because it is rampant in America.” Agastya’s uncle Pultukaku says to Agastya, “you
are an absurd combination, a boarding school English literature education and an obscure name from Hindu myth.\textsuperscript{3} As a school boy he wished "he had been an Anglo-Indian, that he had Keith or Alan for a name, that he spoke English, with their accent."\textsuperscript{4} His friends gave him many new nicknames "Last English\textunderscore man", "hey, English" and "August". "August" is accepted finally. Agastya is athlete-thin and bearded. He does not look like an I.A.S. officer. Rather he looks like a porn-film actor, thin and kinky.

Once Agastya reaches Madna for a year's training in the wiles of administration, he feels unsure and totally lost in the provincial setting of Madna and amidst self-made people "for his life had been profoundly urban". He feels homelessness of a kind as he moves from one Guest House to the other. He is caught with the fear of endemic jaundice and epidemic cholera. He spends the first three weeks with the Madna Collectorate. The mere watching of the repeated scowls of the District Collector, Srivastav, does not interest him to learn the wiles of administration. He himself makes no efforts to know Madna's provincial attractions and "as it unfolded it looked less interesting." Madna appears drab to him and causes his restlessness. Agastya's lack of interest is far outmatched by the officers. Sometimes he wants to
complain to Srivastav that no one is teaching anything, but never does, for he will be reproached for his disinterest. The serious, rather noble business of I.A.S. appeared bewildering and boring. Agastya makes a hasty generalization that “all jobs are boring and life for everyone is generally unhappy” and “the world is not a wonderful place full of exciting opportunities.” He further ruminates “It (the world) is generally dull and fucked every-where. You just have to settle down unless you want to commit suicide.” Life becomes a leisurely affair in Madna. He shirks duties on the false pretext of illness. He suffers from boredom, loneliness which cause restlessness. Marijuana cannot kill his insomnia. He finds himself in a lying mood and assailed by the sense of unreal. Agastya’s reckless lies and impromptu inventions are often dramatic and hilarious. They reveal Chatterjee’s wit and humour. Sometimes Agastya’s mockery results in humour. When Srivastav, the Collector, asks Agastya to explain his name, the latter wonders whether ignoramus’s mother didn’t make his head spin into sleep when he was still a baby with the verse of some venerable Hindu epic. Later, he is half-prepared to answer thus:
“It’s Sanskrit for one who turns the flush just before he starts pissing and then tries to finish pissing before the water disappears.”

In reply to personal questions, he gives the most improbable answers. He describes his wife as a “Norwegian Muslim.” His parents are described as “members of the First Indian Expedition to Antarctica” and his mother as a “Ph.D. in Oceanography from the Sorbonne” and that he himself “climbed Everest last year.” When the greeting “Bugaali Uncle has come” gets transformed into “Pumbali Kunkal has bum”; Agastya explains it to an Englishman and his wife thus:

“It means, roughly, May God grant me fertility.”

Lambent dullness made him reflect on his past college life full of images of Delhi or of Calcutta, walks with his girl friend, Necra in the Lake Gardens, long chats about life and books and sex, and her hesitant revelations of her virginity. Agastya slips into the secret life of the claustrophobic dark room of Rest House where he enjoys himself marijuana, nakedness, soft and incongruous music. He resorts to masturbation and feels an impulse of wasting semen on Madna. His secret life becomes much more exciting and more actual than the real
world of Madna and its Collectorate. He always thinks of sexual obscenities with adolescent flippancy. He remembers Vasant’s wife and Mrs. Srivastav and feels they would have stumps. On seeing a wonderfully pretty tribal woman with large cracked feet and veined arms he wishes “that women were like this instead of being soft white-thighed and demanding of tenderness after coitus.” College girl friends Neera and Renu, Collector Srivastav’s wife Malti, Dhrubo’s mother are all looked upon as images of sex and lust by Agastya’s adolescent eyes. It appears Agastya does not feel at ease with women. For him “to have a wife meant that one was fucking, which was a dirty thing.”

Throughout the months in Madna Agastya has the feeling that his situation is somehow temporary, that he just has to live a few months and that was all. When he reflects on his months in Madna, most of his meetings with so many people blur and merge into one single massive encounter—“a melee of voices and opinions, angles of face, twists of mouth, vagaries of accent, of a single behemoth with a myriad tongues.” In Madna, Agastya, lives, not a cat’s nine lives, but three lives: “the official, with its social concomitance, the unofficial, which is only another name for boozing, and the secret life, not of a Frank Harris or a Casanova, but of a crazed a man ‘jogging by moonlight’ and stoned by
He finds happiness neither with the Madna Collectorate or its Circuit Houses. Thus the Madna life turns out to be neither exciting nor educative.

Next, Agastya reaches Jompanna for a 2 month training as Block Development Officer. First, he thinks things would be better at Jompanna and he would soon settle down to the job. On the contrary he feels ill and dreads every visitor. The daily post is a large fat file, sheets and sheets of incomprehensibilities. He gives up trying to comprehend the files and therein he finds some enjoyment. He can easily sense that his subordinates dislike work and that they are unhelpful in delivering justice to people. In Jompanna, the distracting debate of politicians and the officials does not extenuate his restlessness and on the contrary it aggravates its cramping effect. However, Agastya’s initiative in bringing water tanks to the thirsty tribals of Chimanthi village wins admiration. The 2 month training ends. The Block of Jompanna, however, regards him extremely efficient and its people say, “I.A.S., after all.” He does his work reasonably hard and when he is posted as Assistant Collector of Koltanga, he begins to think. He can not go to Koltanga and start all over again.
A closer look into English. August makes known Agastya's predicament which is spelt out in the very beginning by Upamanyu Chatterjee:

"Anchorlessness - that was to be his chaotic concern in that uncertain year, battling a sense of waste was to be another. Other fodder too, in the farrago of his mind, self-pity in un-congenial clime, the incertitude of his reaction in 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."9

Agastya therefore suffers from dislocation, alienation, dullness, boredom and frustration. He finds himself in a strangulating situation like "the fallen Adam" in Madna under scorching heat aggravated by mosquito menace. He consider himself a misfit, anchorless, unhinged and misplaced "with no special aptitude for anything" and thinks "I should have been a photographer or a maker of adfilms something like that, shallow and urban." He finds it difficult to get used to the workings of his new job and new place. He feels "emptier than usual" and thinks he is" wasting my time." Perhaps, may be due to his sense
of dislocation Agastya goes for soft options like reading Marcus Aurelius, indulging in sexual fantasies, exercising, boozing and smoking. Masturbation becomes the act of self-confirmation.

The words of A.K. Singh appears true in respect of Agastya’s attitude. “By virtue of his attitudinal predilections, Agastya comes very close to being Omar Khayyam’s alter-ego whose characteristics are summed up in one of his rubaiyats:

A Book of verses underneath the Bough
A Jug of Wine, a loaf of bread and thou
Beside me singing in the wilderness,
Oh, wilderness were Paradise enow!”

Agastya’s words to his uncle, Pultukaku, reflect the mood of the above said rubaiyat. He says, “I am not happy... and can’t settle down to the job... I’m in a state of flux. I don’t want challenges or responsibilities... all I want is to be happy... I don’t want heaven, or any of other ephemerals, the power or glory, I just want this movement, this sunlight, the car... the music... watching rajanigandhas... the span of my life is less important than its quality... escape the inequity of the restlessness of my mind.”
Sometimes Agastya is enraged at himself in Madna for a job that compels him to be polite to Srivastav and his wife. He condemns himself for not having planned his life with intelligence and for having dared to believe that he was adaptable enough to any job and circumstance. He philosophizes that 'most men, like him, chose in ignorance and fretted in an uncongenial world,... and slipped into despair.’ However, Agastya’s father writes to him “your job will provide an immense variety” and will be educative. He advises him not to be despondent, and leave the I.A.S. job. His uncle, Tonic also infuses into Agastya a piece of good advice: “...as a bureaucrat you will be in a position to do something...And yet you want to leave I.A.S. for callow reasons, just because in Madna you don’t see the girls you see in Delhi and Bombay.”

He further adds, “...leaving such a job is a ridiculously high price to pay for trying to regain some of the shallow pleasures” of megalopolitan life. Agastya’s uncle, Pultukalu, suggests to Agastya “you need to grow up... you can’t remain an adolescent at twenty four.”

Despite all this, he thinks he will leave the I.A.S. job because he feels he has to think—a mad act. His aunts are outraged. One tries to relate his behaviour to the original sin, the marriage of a Bengali Hindu to a Goan Catholic. Pultukalu’s reaction is rather unconventional. “As
long as that idiot doesn’t join Tonic, “he tells Agastya’s father on the phone.”

Agastya’s predicament seems to be more or less, shared by almost all his friends. They all share Agastya’s characteristics. Shankar, a Deputy Engineer in Minor Irrigation, says to Agastya “We are similar... governed by Shani... neither goes to office after lunch... we hate office and prefer the life outside... we have both been banished in Madna.”

Mahendra Bhatia, an Assistant Conservator of Forests in Madna, is like Agastya, “just one more urban Indian bewitched by America’s hard sell in the Third World.” Bhatia liked T-Shirts and Calvin Klein Jeans, Delhi’s fast food joints...girl friends whom he “could lay any time.” He was an addict to marijuana. His ambition had been to go abroad. He ranted against his job, the small town of Madna, the people, the boredom, the loneliness and the absence of sex. These cries of despair from an inarticulate mouth embarrassed Agastya profoundly. Agastya would never have accepted that he and Bhatia could have anything in common, but now they palpably did: their dislocation.

Dhruvo, a Ph.D. Scholar from the University of Yale, is a friend of Agastya. He joins Citi Bank as an executive. He thinks of giving up his
job and finding Civil Services more lucrative, starts preparing for the examination. Agastya, of course, serves a contrast to Dhruvo in so far as he writes to the latter: "You must be dying while studying for the Civil Service Exam. Meanwhile I've become your American, taking a year off after college to discover himself."14

There is a resemblance between Govind Sathe, a cartoonist and Agastya, "for neither of them opts for the profession...imposed by their parents." And it is Sathe, with his mature insight into the heart of things, adds a further rung in the ladder of Agastya's self-recognition: "Whatever you choose to do you will regret everything or regret nothing..."

Madan is a good example reflecting Agastya's predicament. He is an old college friend of Agastya and Dhruvo. He had recently joined a reputable firm of Chartered Accountants. He says, "Because of this damned job, I have to look clean everyday." For him "it is sick... having a job... having to work..." He himself describes his feeling as: "Everyday in the office I feel as though my head is being raped, like somebody pushed his cock through my ears and is moving it around in my brain, mixing his semen in my brain matter."15 He half-hopes that "his restlessness would thus succumb to attrition." Finally he realizes that
“his mental disquietude was an index of ... immaturity.. and as inevitable sign of growing up...”

Neera and Renu are the college girl-friends of Agastya and Dhruvo. Renu has contracted American cultural virus and in this state of transition she seems to be in a state of confusion. She has developed some friendship with an American. She feels her American friend’s warmth like “a terrible obligation and a responsibility.” She confesses she feels “wary and stained” and her face becomes “blank, bored and closed.” Dhruvo comments: “Beneath her tears she seemed to half-enjoy everything. Quite probable that creating a mess made her feel mature and adult...” The same spirit touches acme in the letter of Neera recording her feelings at the loss of her virginity. She writes to Agastya, “…that I lost my virginity last week... my main feeling is one of great relief. It was like shedding a burden....” This act of hers, of course, expresses her ‘angst’ and symbolic revenge of the natural and biological forces against customs, creeds, conveniences and taboos so unnaturally imposed against them. Thus Neera and Renu emerge as offshoots of an era of post-modernity characterized by confusion, nihilism, scepticism verging on cynicism, incoherence, irrationalism and disbelief. They combine all the three stages of modernity—loss of faith
in itself, state of contrition and cynicism or going agog. Agastya and his friends more or less represent the modern youth. They are all romantic in the sense that they suffer from unheroic and petty dislocation, alienation dissatisfaction, evasion of duty and quest for personal happiness.

A lot of criticism has poured in relating to the eccentric attitude of the protagonist, Agastya. On the cause of Agastya’s alienation, Professor Nissim Ezekiel has pointed:

“It is Agastya’s Darjeeling School that established his alienation of which, he remains conscious virtually in this ‘Indian Story’.”

Pultukaku’s (Agastya’s uncle) remark seems worth-inviting: “Your father doesn’t seem to think that your education should touch the life around you.” Agastya’s father considers Agastya’s metropolitan upbringing to be the capital cause behind his tendency to shirk the responsibilities and to escape the harsh and hard realities of life. After his initial failure to cope with the life in Madna, Agastya thinks of quitting his I.A.S. job and wishes, instead, to be a publisher with his relative friend in Delhi. Agastya’s father observes:
"This is what comes to living in city and not knowing what the rest of India is like... you have led so far in Calcutta and Delhi, a comfortable big city life, wherein your friends and life style have been largely westernized."19

The novelist observes that Agastya's restlessness has very little to do specifically with either Madna or the I.A.S. job. It is a latent malaise which remained in the background as long as his mind was preoccupied with the mundane pleasures of the metropolitan life of Delhi and Calcutta. A.K. Singh's criticism is worth-inviting in this regard. In his words, "Agastya's irreverence emanates from his 'angst' against social, political and moral institutions and the dispensers of this contaminated culture."20

As has been mentioned earlier, the following will discuss the Indian story in its rural setting characterized by poverty, misery and disease.

"In the Madna of the post-colonial period the people are allowed to starve and die of thirst. The officials exploit them physically and financially and expose them to hazards. The Forest contractor indulges in bribing the
Forest officials, underpaying the tribals, beating others like him to a timber contract."21

The result is the Naxalites have occupied the vacuum. The politicians are equally responsible for the sad state of affairs of the remote countries like Madna and Jompanna and "for a politician, the mind and stomach, they are more or less the same."

Sexual exploitation of the tribal women is rampant for some of “these officers are debauchees, and just don’t care about their reputation or the job.” “The best example happens to be Mohan Gandhi, an officer in the Forest Department and whose story ends in a “parodic climax with an ironic twist when his hand was chopped off by the tribals of Chimpanthi for raping one of the women.” It may be Mohan Gandhi’s nemesis or tribal justice for his crime, yet his nomenclatural associations with Mahatma Gandhi lead to conclude that he is not even a sad travesty of the Father of Nation whose ideology finds no following in his own nation. Perhaps, on this note Agastya wished to change jobs.

Further, the post-colonial Indian bureaucracy which is “another complex and unwieldy bequest of the Raj” behaves like crippled issues of colonial culture steeped in corruption, insolence and indifference. Upamanyu Chatterjee’s protagonist, Agastya, does not relish this kind
of state of affairs and he develops a strong aversion for a much-coveted job. He wishes to go back to Delhi to sink his identity and get lost but be happy. In A.K. Singh's words, Agastya prefers "the quest of personal happiness to social happiness for which he has been appointed" and "In spite of his prerogatives as an I.A.S. officer Agastya could not bring about the change in the bureaucratic culture, though he bridges the existing hiatus between the agents of administration and the tribals of Chimpanthi village through his visit to this drought-hit area where the tribals risk their lives of their children for a pail of mud."  

Upamanyu Chatterjee, in the words of A.K. Singh, has employed the parody of Agastya's mythical counterpart, the sage of Agastya of the Hindu epics to relate the hero's achievement:

"Agastya's action and conduct standout in almost direct contrast to those of his mythical counterpart and the various implications of his name. He is neither of the forest, for he lives city life, nor does he find a Ram to give him a bow and an arrow. He enters the dark Vindhyas of bureaucracy but is incapable of stopping them from growing. He is not able to push the mountain of inefficiency, corruption, artificiality and snobbery by an inch. He does
not wander willingly but is compelled to do so. He pines not for Benares but for Delhi. His conduct has some ‘strange’ and ‘unusual’ tinge through which he stands on his own ground of justification. He seems to be a vulgar parody of Agastya of antiquity.”

Chatterjee’s pen describes Agastya as a symbolic revenge against the corrupt administration and society run by the men of old generation, which instead of understanding him and his angst, tried to impose terms on him. Chatterjee himself is an I.A.S. officer and spells out in an interview with Indu Saraiya:

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

Ultimately Agastya himself realizes 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 Bhagavad Gita. Initially he finds it easy to relate his situation to that of Marcus:

"In those months he grew to like immensely this wise sad Roman: Marcus 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."85

The Gita, on the other hand, begins with a handicap. Agastya had always associated it with old age when the afterlife begins to look important and he is startled to discover in it serious reflections on restlessness which he thought was an exclusive predicament of this generation. But ultimately neither Marcus nor the Gita matters because while human reason seemed "so inadequate" and "ill-equipped" "to answer the overwhelming questions," the wisdom of the Gita that "action was better than inaction" seems too exerting:

"The meditation of the authors 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 without any intensity. Yet he had loved those lines once... Now he felt those were far too many words to use to express any genuine longing for emptiness.”

Moreover, Agastya can not dictate terms to circumstances. He can neither obviate personal abyss, nor can he find a problem solution to such a perplexing predicament as surrounded him. Convinced that no handed down wisdom is of any help, that each one has to find a way out of his own nightmare, he quits his job and returns to Calcutta in order to 'think' to sort out his confused mind. Although his giving up a prestigious job 'a mad act' 'irrational to all but himself' appeals everyone, he himself is quite convinced:

"...when you're feeling as fucked and confused as I always do, your mind revolves only around yourself, you can’t be bothered about the opinions of others, or about educating them...”

His decision of unheroic departure seems to be paralleled and prompted by his friend Neera's disclosure of her loss of virginity, her feelings ranging from unequivocal great relief at shedding this burden to confusion and indifference, as she herself writes in her letter.
It is quite easy to view Agastya as a misfit in the rat-race of the world, and his anchorlessness as representative of a generation of ‘cultural cripples’ who have “missed the momentous, the most dramatically significant years, the first five decades of our century....” However, his non-conformity, his discontent despite success make him a natural member of the large family of existential heroes in the novels of Camus, Kafka, Satre, Arun Joshi, Nagarkar and Mukhopadhyaya.

The Times Literary Supplement reviewer of *English, August: An Indian Story* categorizes 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.” Existential heroes 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 which gave to their non-conformity an identity and a certitude; non-conformity was a badge of authenticity. But in the careeristic ethos of the present decade they are out of place, uncertain and confused about the validity of their non-conformity; opting out of the system is no longer an easily acceptable alternative. It is this confusion that assails Agastya, the confusion of a man with an anachronistic sensibility, out of joint with the contemporary
ethos, unhappy with the system, but unsure whether the fault lies with him or with the system—the confusion in short of a 1960s man in the 1980s. 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 English August.

Indeed the Times Literary Supplement 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 a half-truth because the novel English August too suggests that he leaves a job ‘that takes him away from the pleasures of metropolitan life, a job which in any case he does not really need, and more than “the wisdom of his father,” it is the comforts of a life without responsibilities, of life in the Raj Bhavan that draw him to Calcutta. Yet Agastya who goes home at the end is a changed man. Now he is not “a stray dog returning for a free meal” but a man coming home to think through his crises. As David Kerr says: “There is some sense of deep change taking place in Agastya, so deep in fact, that it almost escapes the reader’s notice.”28 This can be found in the later pages of the novel that emphasize his maturity and self-realization. David Kerr further adds “Sen undergoes a slow awakening
from a life of self-centered sensuality into an awareness of human suffering and human responsibility." It is his friend, Govind Sathe, that enables Agastya to come to terms with himself. Sathe seems to bridge the gap between Agastya and his father, with the grim present and the nostalgic past. It is in the company of Sathe that Agastya goes in quest of the Sadhu. Sathe blends the reality with the myth and the legend of the Sadhu—a reminder of the myth of Fisher King:

"...tribal chieftain had a bastard child... disowned both the woman (wife) and the son (child)... she committed suicide in this pool...waters turned red...abandoned child survived...But the waters remained red...until the chieftain said he was sorry...and turned holy...taught the son about the wicked world."30

C.Sen Gupta says “the legend of Sadhu symbolically relates to the protagonist’s own quest of self-realization, his attempt to divine a meaning of life. But salvation is not yet though there is a promise of salvation just as there is a promise of salvation at the end of T.S. Eliot’s The Wasteland.”31
He further adds, "the journey is towards affirmation and not negation, self-realization dawns on the protagonist slowly but-surely and like Thoreau, he doesn’t want to find out ‘that he hadn’t lived.’ In other words he wants to live and out of this living wrest the meaning of life."32

And in this art of living the refrain from the Gita and the philosophy of Marcus Aurelius will act as beacon lights:

"The mind is indeed restless Arjuna, it is indeed hard to train. By constant practice and by freedom from passions the mind in truth can be trained."33

By the novel’s end Agastya’s position is considered in the light of a quotation from Marcus Aurelius:

"To-day I have got myself out of all my perplexities; or rather, I have got the perplexities out of myself: for they were not without but within, they lay in my own outlook."34

There is a cross-cultural message that may be understood. Juxtaposing Anita Desai’s and Sashi Deshpande’s novels, David Kerr says, "... it might be noted that the words of Marcus Aurelius, quoted by Agastya Sen as he comes to terms with his situation, might with equal
justice be applied to Baumgartner in Anita Desai’s *Baumgartner’s Bombay* and to Jaya in Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence.*

According to Meenakshi Rayakar, Agastya is “the intellectual in a state of anomy.” The word ‘anomy’ was used in the ‘fifties’ and ‘sixties’ as a concept akin to alienation where an individual had lost his traditional moorings and was prone to disorientation or psychic disorder. Meenakshi opines that ‘this’ anomy is common to erstwhile colonies. Whether it is Igbo in Wole Soyinka’s *The Interpreters*, Ralph Singh in Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*, Obi in Chinua Achebe’s *No longer At Ease*, or Agastya in Upmanyu Chatterjee’s *English, August: An Indian Story*, the intellectual continues to be the victim of (self-willed many times) the educational system which makes him adore Anglia or the white goddess and causes a sense of displacement. What is more important is that the whole class of ‘the intellectuals’ is the creation of the colonial situation and therefore, has rarely identified itself with the common people.

On the ‘colonial mentality’ of the educated, she further adds: “Decolonization of India was not a cultural decolonization. On the contrary it led to neocolonialism... characterized by proliferation of public schools and a growing affinity for western materialistic culture.”
The resultant outcome is, she says "...these Agastyas run away from the opportunity of relating to common people... The intellectual's state of 'anomy' continues." Meenakshi Rayakar suggests a solution to Agastya's predicament: "The remedy for Agastya’s 'anomy' is 'decolonization'... to be truly achieved... in the country of the mind and the unification of the intellectuals and the masses representing the native ethos..." 

Upamanyu Chatterjee has given a distinctly divergent treatment of the concept of hero. The post-independent writers, particularly those of the 1980s have realized that the hopes and aspirations, dreams and designs of the people have been punctured by rampant corruption, nepotism, casteism, regionalism, fundamentalism and violence. They have realized that the wounds inflicted on the Indian psyche by its countrymen have become ulcerous and rotten. With an extensive use of fantasy and a fresh but irreverent language they have striven to exteriorize the scars of inwardness. They have portrayed modern man who finds himself trapped in multiple pressures and perils and yet chases in vain to get rest or peace. So, there has been a change in his quest. The quest, either personal or topical, however signifies universal connotations signifying the idea of pointlessness or aimlessness of
existence. The new protagonist inevitably is like Agastya and is unlike the archetypal hero who overcomes evil and restores the society to its Edenic State. This hero lacks in heroic status and his unheroic actions are consequences of his reactions against old set of values, facile idealism, stereotyped attitudes and hypocritical moralities. In a way 'hero' in traditional sense has disappeared from the scenario for in an age of disintegration of self and society no man remains a hero. Upamanyu Chatterjee’s Agastya is this ‘different’ hero who fares in a hostile world of Madna. His journey from the metropolises to the rural India evaporates his halo and prolific powers and his punctured figure is recognized as antihero, unheroic hero or non-hero. It has a telling impact on his identity and his quest.

It at a deeper level “English, August: An Indian Story” is the record of self-discovery, at the superficial level it is a satirical portrayal of the Indian beaurocracy that behaves like crippled issues of colonial culture steeped in the vices of artificiality, inefficiency, corruption, indifference, interference, ingratitude, insolence, dis-loyalty, ill-will and selfishness.

Chatterjee’s insight into the I.A.S. finds an echo in every Indian heart acquainted with the 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 Indianisation (of a method of administration, or of a language) is integral to the Indian story. Before 1947 the Collector was almost inaccessible to the people; now he keeps open house, primarily because he does a different, more difficult job."\footnote{40}

Kumar, the S.P. of Madna, outlines this change: "...the Collector and the S.P. of a district are not uppity... we are the servants of the people."\footnote{41}

Unpunctuality go hand in hand with the exploitation of the peons for domestic work.

"Many peons, officially government's servants, did the domestic chores of successive Collectors. 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...they were close enough to grovel for their desires...the peons believed in the indignity of labour, it is part of the Indian Story."\footnote{42}
The I.A.S. has its own hierarchy which gives rise to subtle class distinctions and supercilious attitude to other services. Collector Srivastav says: "Kumar’s an Indian Police Service specimen, they are all jealous of the I.A.S." He adds further:

"Bajaj is another specimen, a bloody promotee."

In Srivastav’s vocabulary “promotee was a vile curse ranking somewhere between bastard and mother fucker... The I.A.S., has a work ethic, these other fellows have none.”

He proudly says, “If the country is moving it is because of us only.”

With a satirical vengeance, Chatterjee highlights how the wives of I.A.S. Officers use their education in supplementing their husband’s income:

"While the husband worked, the wife gathered degrees from the sad colleges of the small towns... these wives used their degrees well, for brandishing them with pride, they returned to these colleges to teach the rubbish they had learnt. It was even more difficult to prevent them from teaching, because that
would mean depriving the Collector’s family of a good monthly sum.”

Agastya himself sees the rottenness of Indian education at the time of interviews for the post of teachers. The candidates who could not answer “what is twenty percent of eighty?” and “who is called the Father of the Nation?” are finally selected to teach their teenage victims.

Chatterjee’s narrative has many such humorous episodes. The one on government’s sterilization programme brings a smile:

“...two deformed men wrestling... the Health Department seemed to be saying that sterilization did not cause impotence.” “Of course on the jeep, they could not have painted a guy fucking with joy....” is the sarcastic reply of the himself.

As a Block Development Officer in Jompanna he learns the harsh reality of development:

“Development is as major a leitmotif in the Indian Story as are the ghoulish of cultures, and the other legacies of a long and complex history... Jompanna was Indian oblivion; life for most was slow and unheroic...
here it seemed a mere word in a Government file."  

Bajaj, the B.D.O. says "economics and politics" are responsible for this 'skewed development.' Consequently there has not been any substantial change in the plight of the tribals. They've never been touched by the Indian mainstream. Besides the hollowness of Governmental schemes for backward classes the novel contains interesting insights into the role of English in India and the state of Education.

The role of education in India of the 1980s:

"...Education is biding time, a meaningless accumulation of degrees... where their education is leading ...."  

Chatterjee plainly speaks about the status of English in India as Agastya recalls his professor's remark "English in India is burlesque..." But surprisingly, real down-to-earth utilitarian attitude to English comes from Srivastav (the Collector):

"The English we speak is not the English we read in English Books... our English should be just a vehicle of communication....It is still
important to know English, it gives
one...confidence.\textsuperscript{51}

The English language is another factor that characterizes Agastya's indifferent sensibility. When his friend says, "August, you are going to get bazaar fucked in Madna," Agastya comments, "The English we speak is an amazing mix... And our accents are Indian, but we prefer August to Agastya."\textsuperscript{52}

Coming to the language employed by Upamanyu Chatterjee in \textit{English, August} it is free from all inhibitions, full of innovative idiom and free of colonial complexes and is matched by similes and images so frequently scattered through the novel. These are some examples:

"...eye-brows were like worms in one's shit." (p.113)

"Joshi & Co. trotted behind the car, like modern-out-of condition version of some eighteenth-century runners accompanying a queen's palanquin." (p. 116)

"...thoughts scurried in his mind undoubtedly like rats in a damp cavern." (p. 165)

"...Office-goers hanging of the doors like tongues out of canine mouths." (p. 108)
About every twenty pages we find Agastya masturbating as though that were terribly interesting. Mr. Srivastav's wife Malti, is described as wearing a "blackbra" beneath a 'yellow' or 'pink' blouse, as though that would drive us insensate. Chatterjee's treatment of sexuality and sensuality is rather adolescent. The use of four letter words is purely gratuitous and affectedly colloquial.

He uses vulgar expressions or words such as big cock, semen, lovely bitch, whore, concubine, fucked, dogfucker, motherfucker, crotch, penis, arsehole, 'mixing semen in my brain matter' and so on. Vasectomy and Tubectomy camps are called cunt-cutting and cock-cutting camps. Certain passages express sex and lust and besides some humour.

A woman is said to "look as though her puss smelt" a type who "was willing to hump." One more example is that Agastya asks his servant Vasant for milk. "Milk" asked Vasant, as though Agastya had just asked him for his 'wife's cunt."

Another example is, Agastya while admiring Marcus' meditations, checks himself to think about Marcus' sex life:
...Perhaps Marcus' meditations weren't really genuine, he could easily have whipped off a few on a marble writing table beside his couch while a beautiful Roman adolescent... sucked him off or while he was ejaculating into a guest's wine goblet muttering quo vadis to the spirit of caligula."53

Agastya distorts the meaning of a beautiful thumri by attributing sexual innuendo: "perhaps the falling of a pearl means the breaking of a hymen."

With reference to sex and lust, Geetha Doctor opines "Chatterjee does not feel ease with women characters as yet. He still seems to see them, as August does, purely as objects of lust."54 She further adds, "The treatment of ladies as objects of lust are meant to be symbolic, the revenge of the dark primal force of nature against a corrupt society."55

Chatterjee uses Indian vernacular words and provides a glossary at the novel's end without which a foreign reader feels difficult to understand. The words in the glossary are: ayah, bhabi, bhai, bhajan, bidi, burfi, chapathi, chee, chowkidar, dal, dhaba, dhoti, dosa, ghazal, goonda, gulabjamun, halwa, hazaar, idli, janau, kabab, karma, khadi kharif, kheer, kurta, lungi, maya, mithai, naib tehsildar, namasthe,
nimboopani, paan, paanwala, patil, pukka burrasaheb, rickshawala, roshogolla, saab, sabhpathi, sadhu, salaam, salwaar, kameez, sambar, samosa, sati, shakti, shamiana, shikar, shivaling, taluka, thumri, tonga and topi.

As regards Chatterjee's art of narrative Geetha Doctor says, "he writes with a throw way charm." He shows a feel for the language, for idioms and nuances, that is rare in Indian writing. The ease with which he writes, and the deft manner in which the story is advanced and the characters fleshed out demonstrates his mastery of the narrative form. It is so impressionistic that its simple imagism takes on the aspect of poetry:

"New Delhi, on one in the morning a stray dog flashed across the road, sensing prey." (p. 1).

Elsewhere sound and light combine to create this image of a picnic spot:

"Almost ten in the morning, under the sun and the faint breeze, the water a vast ribbed sheet of gold and glass; a few boats, still as a painting, birds on sand banks; from below the moist sucking sound of water lapping on a
shore, and murmurs of conversation, from the village women who were washing and carrying away water.”

Chatterjee’s style is a curious mixture of the sublime and mundane, racy and earthy and sometimes he reaches lyrical heights. The following is the example:

“The world turned monochromatic as the skies exploded. Cloud, building, tree, road, they all diffused into one blurred shade of slate. In minutes the gravel turned muddy, then bubbly.”

“It was almost apocalyptic, the beauty of this moon. A huge globe of amber... A black silver of a cloud across its face, giving it a hint of Saturn...Distant trees silhouetted against its faint orange glow, as against a fire, cotton cloud banks tentatively touching its edges, red and luminous. It could have been a planet aflame.”

The third person narrative in English, August lend greater objectivity and allows various characters to participate. Chatterjee shuffles from direct to indirect narration at his will and adds his comments at the reported remark of a character in the first person. The
unnumbered and unnamed chapters serve the stage setting. Agastya's "desultory diary" and the "undated letters" are a part of his narrative technique that reveal parts of the personality of his characters. "The casual, informal, abrupt and open ended termination of English, August calls upon the reader to step in or shape the remaining story according to his designs and dreams. It is to be 'made' rather than 'retold.' 60

There is implicit irony found in the very title of English, August: An Indian Story which lays emphasis on the story part. The story is Indian but it is in English. This is a story about an Indian by an Indian, which might otherwise have been "Indian Agastya: An English story." The ironic connotations of the title suggest that though the English have left, yet English still enjoys its Augustan day in India.

It seems English, August is an objective correlative of the novelist Chatterjee himself. It is pregnant with the element of autobiography. The predicament of Agastya is to some extent considered almost that of Chatterjee himself. For instance, Chatterjee joined the I.A.S. in 1963 at the age of 24. His protagonist Agastya is also 24. Just like Agastya, Upamanyu Chatterjee might also have experienced the I.A.S. a fruitless saga. It is natural that Chatterjee finds objective correlative in Agastya's predicament.
NOTES


3. Ibid., p. 129.

4. Ibid., p. 2.

5. Ibid., p. 45.


7. Ibid., p. 185.

8. Ibid., p. 48.

9. Ibid., p. 25.


12. Ibid., pp. 170-171.

13. Ibid., p. 72.


15. Ibid., p. 173.

16. Ibid., p. 118.


19. Ibid., p. 149.


23. Ibid., pp. 86-87.


26. Ibid., p. 135.

27. Ibid., p. 299.


29. Ibid., p. 130.


32. Ibid., p. 121.


34. Ibid., p. 283.


37. Ibid., p. 111.

38. Ibid., p. 111.

39. Ibid., p. 111.


41. Ibid., p. 23.

42. Ibid., p. 57.

43. Ibid., p. 58.

44. Ibid., p. 58.

45. Ibid., p. 58.

46. Ibid., p. 60-61.

47. Ibid., pp. 86-87.
48. Ibid., p. 85.

49. Ibid., pp. 249-250.

50. Ibid., p. 3.

51. Ibid., pp. 59-60.

52. Ibid., p. 1.

53. Ibid., p. 69.


55. Ibid., p. 19.

56. Ibid., p. 18.


58. Ibid., p. 99.

59. Ibid., p. 239.