CHAPTER 4
CONCLUSION

Since the present century is drawing to a close with Indian independence a distant memory, it is worthwhile examining the work of novelists especially of the 1980s and 1990s if only to evaluate their insights into the life as lived in contemporary India. The partition anguish and the euphoria of freedom are pushed to the periphery and what takes centre stage is India's achievement in the post-colonial context. Upamanyu Chatterjee's English, August: An Indian story as has been discussed, has two parts - the predicament of modern youth in the wake of western impact and his awareness of his inadequacies and the predicament of people at large. When the former part of the title is discussed, the novel is considered a subtle metaphor of contemporary youth's quest for self-realization - a pathetic, humorous and ridiculous journey from rootlessness to maturity, a struggle to come to terms with oneself. When the latter part of the title is discussed, the novel appears to be a cluster of different stories of the post-colonial bureaucracy, development, politics, political leaders, education, language and so on through various characters in the drama of an Indian
situation. These finished or unfinished stories of 'An Indian Story' are inextricably woven with the main story of 'English August' and tend to be various layers of the amorphous structure of the novel. So, the novel shows a thoroughly urban Indian's bewildered encounter with the rural ethos of provincial Bharath. This is a satirical novel suggesting how India still suffers from the colonial hangover. The Indian Governments continued the English bureaucracy without realizing that the country needed not Stephenians but those who knew rural India. This is effectively dramatised by the novelist in English August. The central character Agastya not only knows nothing about rural India but also lacks physical energy to work long hours for the rural uplift. The other characters who form the bureaucracy are no better. The novelist seems to suggest that the woes of the people remain unmitigated, thanks to the incompetence, corruption and ignorance of the government officials.

It would be unfair however, to dismiss the novel as projecting a gloomy picture of India. The very fact that the novel has an open ending with Agastya debating within himself about continuing or not continuing in his present job is an indication that the novelist has not pronounced his judgement on the contemporary Indian scene. That Agastya might give up the job in honest self-appraisal or might return to service with
greater zeal and work for the betterment of the people are suggested towards the end of the novel. Thus the novel, however, does not permit any complacent reading. The inability of the reader to arrive at any single interpretation complements the indecision that marks the protagonist’s sensibility. This fact is reinforced by the blurring of the line between the serious and the flippant, reality and fantasy.

English, August is a modern novel in the sense its hero can be juxtaposed with the characters in the works of Satre, Kafka and Camus. The feeling of absurdity, meaninglessness in life, pointlessness of existence, alienation and angst that we find in continental writers are also found in Chatterjee’s novels. Unlike the characters in Anand, R.K. Narayan, Rajarao, Kamala Markendaya who have roots in India and who have that Indianness, Chatterjee’s central characters do not have that local identity. They have a universal dimension because their predicament is a predicament of many in the world.

Equipped with perspicacity and penchant for irreverence, Chatterjee has extirpated many unnatural and nugatory taboos pertaining to theme, its treatment and language. Besides the novelist’s concern with the context, country and culture, it is his protagonist who
lends discernible dimensions to the novel. The parodic, self-parodic mode and intent are embedded in the textual structure of the novel.

*English, August* is recognisably a contemporary characteristic novel of the 1980s for its three aspects. The first is the ease with the medium. The second is the reflection of larger issues in what seems to be an intensely private struggle. Finally there is the unavailability to Agastya of options in life that earlier generations had found viable. The novel is also considered to have something of both the novels of the 1960s and of the 1980s: the concern with the unrooted self of the former and the hybrid idiom of the latter.

*The Last Burden* may also be regarded as a significant achievement of Chatterjee in that the writer is able to spin a long story about a family. Just as the English novelist Jane Austen deals with "a little bit of ivory two inches wide", Chatterjee deals with just a family. It is true that the novel appears morbid with repeated references to chronic ill-health, treatment and hospitals, what makes the novel is its realism. The novel reflects the goings on in every family, its commitments to the older people, its financial inadequacies and worries, misunderstandings between parents and their daughters-in-law. Chatterjee seems to suggest that they constitute the true nature of
family relationships in India. At the end, the novel suggests that the institution of family has to continue even if it means living with so many tensions as is evidenced by Jamun deciding to take care of his father as 'The Last Burden.'

Chatterjee deliberately blurs time and space moving back and forth in a freewheeling fashion between past and present, changing places, noting the minutiae of the processes of the mind in this exploration middle class morality whose members are just 'All dressed-up and nowhere to go.' Bizarre and bitter, the novel takes us away from the routine expressions of many Indian novelists into a relatively unexplored domain of lower middle class materiality, meanness and avarice. His linguistic inventiveness, scatological imagination and his vision are meant to shock and disgust, perhaps there is something redemptive about it all because even disgust has its therapeutic value of purging the emotions of the members of middle class enormities. The novel by itself has no positive values but its very negativity seems to imply its opposite.

Both the novels are ironical in that the protagonists Agastya and Jamun are simultaneously aware of their positive as well as negative elements in their character without being guilty of self-idealization.
Chatterjee is a man of letters of remarkable talent. He has used English much more unproblematically and uninhibitedly with more verve, ease and Indianess. It is a hybrid of English, American and Indian English besides Hindi and other Indian languages. This new idiom has cosmopolitan sensibility. The facility with which the language is used and the ease with which he changes registers command approbation from the contemporary learners though his two novels seem to have a vein of media hype and the cocktail circuit and belong more to the history of Public Relations than of literature.

The deviation from the norms of native speakers of English, the literal English translations of typical modes of expression or usage characterize not merely Upamanyu Chatterjee’s special modes but also his valued patterns and attitudes. Chatterjee is highly educated, westernized, cosmopolitan and cultured. The novels emerge out of his sense of contemporary realism and its expression in art. It shows his acceptance of reality as conceived in day-to-day experience of a temporal flux, rather than the reality rooted in the timeless universals. He is a part of a modern realistic tradition in fiction which expresses a new historical approach.