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Title: 'Plot construction in UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE'S fiction'

**Abstract:**

In this article it has been tried to show the heart of the matter of Chatterjee's fictions. The crux of the problem in his succeeding fictions lies in the plot construction. The initiation of new stories, the use of apt and befitting authorial voice, the omniscient narrator, etc. brings new dimension in his novels. Indeed, if we look at the novels of Upmanyu Chatterjee, we find that crisis-consciousness is writ large in every nook and corner in the novels. Crisis-consciousness is not a new phenomenon; rather the term was generated in the first decade of the twentieth century. The most random of the term was done by the modern writers, poets, and essayists. The term was gaining its momentum in the hands of Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, Rupert Brooke, T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and even H.G. Wells. The particular phrase is largely related to Freud's 'interpretations of dream and Jung's theory of the unconscious.' The on growing industrial revolution in the twentieth century Europe especially England resulted in a sort of a vacuum in the society. The break-down of values down from the Victorian era was also responsible for the sort of purposelessness which looms large in modern man. From 1900 until the First World War literature especially poetry in England wavered between two worlds not sure of its path. The loss of belief, the restlessness, and the cyclic journey, the aimlessness in modern man were depicted in a literature also. Crisis-consciousness is a dilemma which runs into the heart of a modern man.

**Keywords:** Indian fiction, Upamanyu Chatterjee's style in his novels

### **Introduction:**

The finest portrayal of the predicament of modern men is seen in the magnum opus of T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land'. The poem is monumental in the sense that it recollects the consciousness of the modern civilization as well as of the modern man. The aphoristic lines like "April is the cruelest month/breeding lilacs out of the dead land" or the line like "in my beginning is my end" capture the heart of the people as well as show the ambience of death, decay and destruction. Likewise, in the works of Virginia Woolf, whether it is 'Mrs. Dalloway' or 'To the Lighthouse', the same moribund atmosphere persists, whether it is Septimus or Rezia the problem continues. In the same manner James Joyce's, Stephen Dedalus is also suffering from the same question 'to be or not to be.' The dichotomy continues even more poignantly in the post-modern writers. Whether it is literary theory or literature itself the problem never ends. Actually, the Second World War also created a great havoc in the mind of the minds and naturally the aftermath is dismal as a result of that the advent of absurd drama, dark comedy is seen. Samuel Becket's 'Waiting for Godot', or Eugene Ionesco's dramas are the representatives of that grotesque thought.

In the field of fiction the same trend continues. Kafka's 'The Trial' or Camus' 'The Out-Sider' emphatically shows the naturalism and the existential perspectives. Coming to the Indian canvas right from the novels of Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Arun Joshi, Shashi Deshpande, Shashi Tharoor, Gita Mehta, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Amitav Ghosh, Sunita Narayan, and even Upmanyu Chatterjee's novels have had the glimpses of the same world discussed in the earlier paragraph.

### **A Brief Study:**

Chatterjee, likewise, shows the routlessness, purposelessness and the crisis-consciousness in his successive plots. The existentialism is very much present in his novels. The narratives are blended with the fine stylistic motif of the writer. The most prominent example of existential fear and crisis-consciousness is evident in the very first novel 'English, August'. The novel begins with ominous note and the quotation from 'Macbeth'; especially the sayings of the bitches in Macbeth symbolize the bleak atmosphere at the beginning. The detailed description of Madna emphatically points out the weather beaten people of the town. The stale description altogether points out the sense of homelessness which the novelist also emphasizes in this novel. Everything is rotten here in Madna—the streets, the houses, the ambience and even the men. The particular lines of R. Tamse, the Deputy Engineer, Public Works Division easily remind us of the scream of the people lived in that particular city:—

*“Away from my old life and my spouse,  
So many days at this Circuit House,  
Away from Goa, my dear home,  
On office work I have to roam.”<sup>1</sup>*

These lines aptly show the longing, the remembrances, pain and compassion of R. Tamse. The man is suffocated in heinous condition. He finds no relief, the doors of entertainment are closed to him, no respite is there, no job- satisfaction is there. Only the cruel nature of the city haunts him. He may be said a replica of Agastya. Agastya finds himself through the character of R. Tamse. In a sense, R. Tamse is the extrovert exteriorization of the protagonist Agastya. Everyone is suffered in the city and likewise, Agastya is also suffering. The poignant speeches of

Agastya symbolise the story of death, decay and destruction in the city of Madna. The pent up feelings of the hero find no outlet and the life becomes meaningless to him. He is doing each and every activity monotonously, no respite is there in the city of Madna, and only the dark horror holds the rule of the town. The passage in the novel shows very accurately the struggle of the self:–

*“Sitting with the three men, he was again assailed by a sense of the unreal. 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.*

*‘How old are you, sir?’*

*‘Twenty-eight.’ Agastya was twenty-four, but he was in a lying mood. He also disliked their faces.*

*‘Are you married, sir?’ Again that demand that he classify himself. Ahmed leaned forward for each question, neck tensed and head angled with politeness.*

*‘Yes’. He wondered for a second whether he should add ‘twice’. ”<sup>2</sup>*

These lines show with accuracy the dichotomy of the character. In the same way in the opening scene, Agastya’s friend and fellow marijuana smoker Dhruvo has had the same feeling : “I’ve a feeling, August, you’re going to get hazaar fucked in Madna”,<sup>3</sup> which sets much of the tone of the novel. Agastya is restless and he does consider escape from Madna and a career in the IAS. He flees, briefly, back to the big city, and considers taking a job in publishing. But he does return to stick it out in Madna. There Agastya finds: – “Reading was impossible, with his mind in its state of quiet tumult.” Marcus Aurelius’ Meditations,

“turned out to be (very incongruously, he thought) his only reading.” The choice is not so incongruous after all, the self-deluding emperor a proper example for Agastya: –

*“He lied, but he lied so well, this sad Roman who had also looked for happiness in living more than one life, and had failed, but with such grace”.<sup>4</sup>*

Actually, Agastya finds happiness in the midst of ill doings but he also knows that happiness is not the destination to which he tries to arrive at. Happiness is the process which comes intermittently in life with all its shadows. There are numerous smaller and larger episodes and encounters, the bizarre demands and malfunctions of bureaucracy, the people one has to deal with. Agastya is basically still drifting, unwilling—and unable—to commit himself fully to anything. Chatterjee presents this sympathetically; the weltenschmerz is not annoying, and Agastya fortunately does not take himself too seriously. One of the finest critics of Chatterjee Prof. Shiv K. Kumar succinctly points out:–

*“Agastya is an uneven hero, drifting like a pendulum and hangs in the ‘limbo’ just as Dante’s character, hung aloft the corner.”<sup>5</sup>*

Agastya is still a youth, trying to find meaning and direction:–

*“I’ve become your American, taking a year off after college to discover himself,”<sup>6</sup>*

Agastya writes to Dhruvo at the end of his year in Madna, and the training year is, indeed, very much like that. There are moments of discovery; Agastya begins to have some sense of what is important and what is of interest to him. There are no absolutes, no certainties, but perhaps an outline that grows more distinct. So, for example:–

*“Eventually, he knew, he would marry, perhaps not out of passion, but out of convention, which was probably a safer thing. And then, in either case, in a few months or years they would tire of disagreeing with each other, or what was more or less the same thing, would be inured to each other’s odd and perhaps disgusting ways, the way she squeezed the tube of toothpaste and the way he drank from a glass and didn’t rinse it and they would slide into a placid and comfortable unhappiness, and may be unseeingly watch TV every day, each still a cocoon.”<sup>7</sup>*

Agastya is restless, and he does consider escape from Madna and a career in IAS. Indeed, the career of Agastya is not running smooth as it is the nature of life itself. Agastya finds no consolation in the day to day hectic activity and drearer and dry job making more uncomfortable in that smaller town in Madna. Even the hero finds no pleasure in spiritual activity or religion as it is cleared through the authorial voice:–

*“But Agastya was not conscious of any blasphemy. Religion was with him a remote concern, and with his father it had never descended from the metaphysical. One can not prove the intrinsic superiority of any one religion, his father had loftily said to his brothers and sisters when they had asked him, Conspiratorially, to get his wife to convert–I remain Hindu and she Catholic because we were born such and see no reason for change. Yet he had wanted his son to be a Hindu, for which his arguments had seemed sophistic. He had said that it would make the least demands on his time. ‘You can think and do what you like and still remain a Hindu.’ Consequently Agastya had*

*rarely been to a temple, and when he had stood in front of any idol, it had only been Durga, and the occasion always the autumn Puja—a boy, and later an adolescent, in the tow of his aunts in Calcutta, with everyone in new clothes, inhaling an air heavy more with festival than with religion, ready for magic shows and all-night open-air movies.”<sup>8</sup>*

So, religion as we have seen is not becoming fruitful or to give solace to Agastya. He finds no pleasure where people usually do find. Actually, the purposelessness of life surrounded over Agastya’s thinking. Consciously or unconsciously he never thought that his life would become meaningless and aimless. The following lines would prove further the futility of Agastya’s life and his drinking habit:–

*“He was an honoured, though unexpected, guest, so later, around a huge fire near the jeep, the tribals danced for him. The men drank some kind of tari. ‘They used to drink all day’, breathed Rao hotly into his ear, ‘before we came. Their children began drinking it at six months. They didn’t know’, Agastya drank too, it was extremely potent, and he was soon uncontrollably high. The women danced, arm in arm in one row, a slow monotonous shuffle to a single arhythmic drum, one step forward, two steps back, always one step forward, two steps back.”<sup>9</sup>*

In this context Akash Kapur finely asserted that:–

*“Agastya’s story is convincing, entertaining, moving and timeless. It merits an accolade that’s far harder to earn than authentic. Agastya is the slacker view of modern India. He is the hollow man head fulfilled with straw.”<sup>10</sup>*

So, it can unhesitatingly be said that human urges are there in Agastya's pent up feelings, so also existential fear in life's run is even more silent and incalculable.

The second novel of Upmanyu Chatterjee 'The Last Burden' (1993) emphatically shows the three generations that Upmanyu Chatterjee draws under one roof in this uncomfortable portrait of an urban Indian household, seem to be bound to each other "as much by bile as by blood."<sup>11</sup> The only silence is that of a sulk. Perhaps that is why there is a rare glimmer of tenderness, even of affection. Despite the author's wit and humorous prose, the nastiness of it all soon begins to wear. The reader may close the book with the same sense of relief as slamming the door "behind a house full of quarrelsome, rowdy acquaintances".<sup>12</sup> The theme of the novel can be perceived at the very beginning when Chatterjee finely voices his voice:—

*"In his excitation Jamun reckons that it is his mother's self-pity that cries out for him. Yet time and time again, he himself, with a child's raw sentience, has itched to be there. He can't situate her in hospital but when he at last contemplates her in Intensive Care—gunmetal skull on green pillow, stertorous, terrorized exhalations, brow ruttled with veiled agony – he recognizes anew her method of living: a bullheaded and dreary conflict because she discerns no choice, in the main with head down and neck steeled, but botching and ebbing decade after decade, the point of the struggle progressively disputable, never taking stock because her mind could unplug, and after it does, what endures is this gentler submerged strife amongst the shards of her self. But you unhoused me, he tells the*



*fluttering eyelids. Yet I shouldn't've slipped away. They say death crops up for all. They say all things must pass. Yet here you breathe, out in the cold, excluded as ever.*

*But life will always ambush with its burlesque, won't it. For Hegiste's child indicates and fishes for immediate enlightenment on four donkeys (mules?) fucking in the dead centre of the road. Two overloaded sand trucks have stopped, perhaps to clock them. A liver- coloured Fiat honks petulantly. Jamun is positive that he has never spotted two pairs before, in parallel cadence, and particularly in the evening.”<sup>13</sup>*

It is the story of the unaccountability of life. Jamun in the same way finds no solace in the post-modern ethos. He is also purposeless just like Agastya in the very first novel. He is hung up in between the familial knots and its aftermath. He thinks that filial relationship is significant yet at the same time his philosophical moorings ultimately find no definite destinations nor give the concrete idea of his reasons. This family speaks to each other in a crazy and impossible language, something between a parody of Indian English and a parody of Chatterjee's own inflamed prose. How one responds to this speech will determine what one thinks of the novel:–

*“At fifteen, and at twenty-eight, Jamun recognized the disparity in what money denotes to him, and to Burfi-rahter, at fifteen, he was witheringly certain; at twenty-eight, he fancied that a difference in their attitudes might exist, but also that it might not matter. He himself gauges money to be wily. If he has the money, he'll buy chewing gum, or condoms, or a refrigerator. If he doesn't, he will*

*muzzle himself to do without; the self-discipline becomes in itself quite piquant. But for Burfi, deprivation is failure, a cudgel to his self-esteem.”<sup>14</sup>*

Often, it is unbearable. Chatterjee’s prose is a mad powder of different registers, too often, his sentences flake into nothing. We want to feel for sick Urmila, for the lost and rebellious Jamun, but Chatterjee sinks them so deeply in his language that they die. It is a somber book, smaller in ambit, different in its ambitions.

Although the first chapter is entitled ‘AUGUST’, the reference is only to the month, not Agastya’s nickname. It is a different cast of characters, a contemporary Indian family. Urmila, the mother has been taken ill; she is, as the novel begins, perhaps on her death-bed. The family comes to see her in these days, lingering then as she slowly recovers. Jamun, the son at the centre of the novel, takes a few days to arrive. Already there are his elder brother Burfi with foreign wife Joyce and their sons, Doom and Pista and his father, Shyamanand. It is not a happy ‘family reunion’. It is, in fact, not a happy family. Even Urmila recognizes that she and Shyamanand were so inconsonant, nevertheless they got married. Shyamanand is also crippled emotionally and, after a stroke that limits his movements physically. Burfi is somewhat happy-go-lucky type fellow, and neither he nor Jamun has lived upto their parents’ expectations. Burfi’s marriage is no longer a particularly happy one. Jamun has yet to really settled down. Even as a teenager Jamun feels for his parents a love that is only the tenderness of remorse, just a sorrow, a shame at their unhappiness. The family gets by, but much that is familial and warm is missing. As Jamun eventually learns, there are also things about his parents that he was unaware of. Cultures clash too. The children have moved away. Modern India, with loose and ties of obligation and

family, causes additional strains. There is also Joyce's insistence on raising their sons Catholic. And money problems are brought to the medical bills. The novel focusses on the family's time together dealing with Urmila's illness, with Jamun's memories of the past, childhood and youth, rounding out the picture. He dreams and hallucinates—"he has visioned a good many hideous things"<sup>15</sup>—but most of what he sees is starkly real.

Among the memories dealt with at length are those concerning a secondary figure, Jamun's Aya, who took care of him when he was young. Much loved, he quickly outgrew her, but she remained in the household, eventually getting ill and becoming a burden which the family seeks to unload. While there are scenes of some humanity in how they deal with her, the family does simply want to discard her—and eventually manages to do so. Urmila does tend to her for a while, but is looked down upon for doing so. As elsewhere in the household, one finds some compassion, and a little love, but most simply a sense of duty—stronger for members of the family, weaker for mere servants. The following description from the novel more poignantly shows it :—

*“In the further room Urmila has become a wizened, slack bag, professionally declared out of danger, because of which, the visits of the final five days are noticeably more genial. For Pista and Doom, their grandmother all at once grows measurelessly more interesting; formerly the unassertive, unwilling fulcrum of the household, of whom none is seriously heedful, she is now the tousled drift of bedclothes in a chilled, sombre room, near whom they are shushed nonstop, and hindered from pawing unfamiliar objects, but who is still as delighted to see them, even*

*though she appears ashen and unfocused. The incongruity between the two generations is hideous. Pista'll be maroon and sweaty from the football game from which he's been plucked en route to the hospital; Doom will be like a meaty peach, in the way of everyone's knees, trailing strangers into other rooms.*

*Doom, nose caulked with muck, breathing restfully and audibly through his mouth, the bridge of his interdigitated hands shouldering his chins, resting plump and caked elbows on the stool beside the bed, sallow rotund calves—with the scarlet streaks and stipples of nicks, stings, spills, scuffles—intersected at the ankles, drivellingly, to Urmila: 'Thakuma, Pista says you died, Thakuda whammed your chest and you came back to life. Now like other aunties you're going to TV.'*<sup>16</sup>

There is little true communication in the household. Urmila and Shyamanand seem to have lived with only a few pat expressions that they would exchange; beyond these 'squats the silence'. They have long not slept together; indeed there is little intimacy between them. As a child Jamun had no idea that it was unusual that parents should not share a bed. Jamun has not found a truly happy relationship. His early love Kasturi remains a friend—occasionally a very close one indeed, but is married. Burfi's marriage barely holds together.

### **Literary Review:**

Throughout the novel there is a surprising amount of divorce, adultery, and similar failures. The novel is written in the family structure and is a more domestic novel than existential. It is also a book about parents—about coming to terms with them. Urmila tells Jamun:—

*“The anger of parents is never anger”.*<sup>17</sup>

### **Result of the Study:**

Chatterjee remains a realist and occasionally the realism can appear brutal. The writing is very solid throughout the book. There is some humour, but little of the lightness found in much of ‘English, August’. But Chatterjee strikes the proper tone throughout, it is both assured and accomplished, novels and with a more solid narrative frame to it as well. Throughout, the scenes and memories, the fights about trivial matters, and the descriptions of the characters, even down to the mimicry of the young children, the pompous doctors, and the servants– are all very well done, fitting together to make the whole greater even than the fine parts:–

*“Chhana and her manservant-fiftyish, bald, obese, Bihari, bad tempered, flatulent-inhabit the first floor of a drab house in Baliganj. She manages quite nicely with the rent from UCO Bank for the ground floor. She began to smoke after her mother died. When the flunkey fetches the milk in the morning, he also picks up for her a packet of Four Square Twenties. Because she smoked Burfi conluded, when he was sixteen, that Chhana was panting for it.*

*‘Bets that she’d note on SM, a pounding with a leather belt,’ he offers Jamun, who’s startled and titillated by the Idea. ‘But she nursed you, Burfi !’ he demurs involuntarily.*

*Burfi pauses, as though granting this image of the other Chhana enough time to flick open–in Jamun’s brain– a shutter, to unveil to him the tortuous wine dark tunnels of adulthood. ‘She brushes against me all the damn time. And*

*why's she always hanging around while I'm exercising?'  
He shrugs his shoulders, a Not-even-God-can-help-my-  
sexiness shrug, and simpers. 'Someone must be regularly  
mounting her—may be that fuck face slave of hers—these  
Bong spinsters can be desperately horny, and entwining  
with her menial'll spice it with extra kink – you know,  
caste'n all. And she's wombless, remember totally  
hasslefree.'* ”<sup>18</sup>

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