

Depiction of Indian Society, Culture and Politics in the Novels of Upamanyu Chatterjee: A Critical Review

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Abstract: Novelist Upamanyu Chatterjee combines both the insider knowledge of the Indian Administrative Service and his satirical eye for the absurdities of the postcolonial state and therefore has a unique place among contemporary Indian English writers. The present review paper concentrates on how English, August: An Indian Story (1988), The Last Burden (1993), The Mammaries of the Welfare State (2000), Weight Loss (2006), Way to Go (2010), and Fairy Tales at Fifty (2014) and Chatterjee's later fiction depict Indian society, culture and politics. In total, the review references more than 50 scholarly, journalistic and archival sources. The criticism of Chatterjee can be grouped under three main themes – Indian society – including the role of the joint family system; class difference and the bureaucratic hierarchy – linguistic hybridity and westernisation as a result of colonialism, and postcolonial constructions of identity; political awareness – Satire of the welfare state, corruption, and the stagnation of India's administrative systems. Moreover, a few areas of research in Chatterjee's work remain underdeveloped as well as gaps in current scholarship have emerged from this review, such as a lack of a single comprehensive treatise on the interaction between Society, Culture and Politics in Chatterjee's writing; lack of sufficiently developed theoretical frameworks, in particular those of necropolitics and affect theory; and the relative neglect of his later works. Collectively, Chatterjee's fictitious literature can be read as one of the most comprehensive critiques of the Indian bureaucratic state and the Indian middle-class family found in contemporary Indian writing in English.

Keywords: Indian society, Indian culture, political satire, bureaucracy, postcolonial fiction.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Modern Indian English fiction has in the last thirty years or so (1980 to today) moved away from the Nationalist and Gandhi-like views of earlier writers and become increasingly sceptical of, and Satirical towards, the State of India and its institutions as seen through a colonial lens [1]. This shift was noted in the work of Meenakshi Mukherjee when she wrote that the defining feature of both the Indian Novel in English and its language was the tension between a colonial language inherited from Britain, and a Subject Matter based upon the Culture, Identity and Heritage of India. Upamanyu Chatterjee has carved out a unique niche in this evolving context, with both a career in the IAS and his first novel being published in

1988[2,3]. Rather than taking a more external view of India's Bureaucracy or of the experience of living in the Middle-Class of India, Upamanyu is a Member of that Bureaucracy and therefore, has an authentic experience of what it is to be part of this system, yet ironically portrays his experiences from an outward perspective [4,5].

Chatterjee's works are *English August: An Indian Story* (1988), *The Last Burden* (1993), *The Mammaries of the Welfare State* (2000), *Weight Loss* (2006), *Way to Go* (2010), *Fairy Tales at Fifty* (2014), *The Revenge of the Non-Vegetarian* (a novella, 2018), *The Assassination of Indira Gandhi* (a collection of short stories, 2019), *The Hush of the Uncaring Sea* (2025) and *Lorenzo Searches for the Meaning of Life* (2025). Various interpretations have been put forward by scholars and critics such as a critique of post-colonialism, black comedies, family sagas, and satirical works on the bureaucracy and government administration in India, and many more [6,7]. In all these different readings, Chatterjee's work is united by three themes: the state of Indian society (here especially the middle class and the institution of the joint family); the tension within Indian culture as it confronts the West and its 'other'; and a critical political awareness that constantly scrutinises the operation of the post-colonial welfare state [8].

The purpose of this paper is to review critically the present scholarship on Chatterjee in order to map out how these three concerns (society, culture and politics) have been read separately in the criticism, and where the criticism may be expressed productively. It is important to put Upamanyu Chatterjee's fiction in a broader framework of Indian modernity with the theoretical reflections of Homi Bhabha's theorisation of colonial/post-colonial hybridity and Partha Chatterjee's account of the post-colonial nation state [9] [10]. The review follows the road of the novel one by one, and theme by theme; and finally, in its last but one section, it focusses on gaps in the critical record.

2. UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE AND HIS LITERARY OEUVRE

Born at Patna, Bihar on 19th December 1959, Upamanyu Chatterjee grew up at St Xavier's School, Delhi, and at St Stephen's College, University of Delhi, where he studied English literature before he joined the Indian Administrative Service in 1983 [11] [12]. He was posted at various locations in the Maharashtra cadre and he became Writer-in-Residence at University of Kent in 1990 and held various senior posts such as Director (Languages) in the Ministry of Human Resource Development and Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Defence [13] [14]. In

his fictions, he is frequently praised for the ethnographic realism with which he represents the workings of Indian officialdom and he is equally praised for his capacity as a bureaucrat in his observations of the same [15].

In 1988, his first novel *English, August: An Indian Story* was compared with J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim* for its portrayal of an alienated, aimless young protagonist when it was published [16]. In 1994 the novel was turned into a feature length film also named "What Is This Thing Called Love". In *The Last Burden* (1993), the Indian middle-class family or joint family was the focus where the mother Urmila was suffering from the last illness, the husband Shyamanand and the sons Jamun and Burfi [17]. In 2000, *English, August*, was followed by another sequel titled *The Mammaries of the Welfare State*, which went on to win Sahitya Akademi Award for English writing in 2004 and is considered as the most sustained satire of the Indian bureaucracy and the political establishment by Chatterjee. In fact, *Weight Loss* (2006) followed the sexually obsessed civil servant Bhola from adolescence into middle age, a novel which some critics have interpreted as an extended metaphor for the rotten and directionless postcolonial nation [18-20]. *The Last Burden* was followed by *Way to Go* (2010), which took the story of Jamun and his father Shyamanand to old age and death, and was shortlisted for the Hindu Best Fiction Award. Chatterjee's exploration of the themes of ageing, desire and administrative ridiculousness continued in *Fairy Tales at Fifty* (2014) and the subsequent novella and story collections.

Chatterjee was awarded Sahitya Akademi Award in 2004 for his contribution to literature and the Order of Officier des Arts et des Lettres by the French Government in 2008-09. Chatterjee was one of the first Indian English novelists to extensively fictionalise the "new class" of westernised urban Indians, who had yet to be extensively treated in regional-language or English-language Indian fiction, according to critics like Radhika Mohanram. As part of the diaspora-adjacent but residing-in-India subgenre of Indian English fiction, Chatterjee has been placed among Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor and Rohinton Mistry as a unique voice in the genre, by Mansing Kadam.

3. DEPICTION OF INDIAN SOCIETY

The other consistent theme to emerge in Chatterjee's fiction is the decline of the joint family and its substitution, albeit in an incomplete manner, by a nuclear, emotionally depersonalized family. The novel – *the Last Burden* – has been described as revealing the myth of a 'joint

Hindu family' while focusing on 'banalities and quiet cruelties of everyday domestic existence'. Anupama Sharma and Roopesh Chaturvedi read the novel as a realistic criticism on the loss of filial duty, which is evident in Burfi's near total lack of interest in his old age parents, as indicative of a larger society's shift from the duties that used to bind the joint family together [21]. In the same vein, V. Sangeetha and S. Selvapriya propose that the novel explores the dyad of father and son, husband and wife, in the context of modernity, suggesting that the author's concern is not with the nostalgization of the joint family but on an "unsentimental" narrative of the reasons behind its demise [22]. The Wikipedia entry on the novel encapsulates the theme of the novel succinctly, describing *The Last Burden* as a depiction of financial, social and emotional issues that would lead people to prefer a nuclear family over a joint family which was the norm in India until a few decades ago.

In the sequel *Way to Go*, Jamun's story with his father is continued through old age, sickness and death, and has been called by reviewers a darker examination of old age, death and travels with loved and estranged family members than its predecessor [23]. When read together, *The Last Burden* and *Way to Go* can be considered Chatterjee's "domestic diptych," a couple of narratives about an Indian middle-class family spanning over about two decades of social transformations.

Chatterjee's fiction also focuses on class difference and smaller and metropolitan India's social divides as well as the family. In contrast, the cosmopolitan education and the English medium of his upbringing are contrasted with the rural poverty and administrative neglect of Madna, which, as KBS Krishna reads it, are the key points of the novel's investigation into identity and individuality in the context of sharply defined social categories [24]. Another study, made public in JETIR, also highlights this difference between rural and urban experiences, as brought to light by the insights of Chatterjee, who has served in rural posts. The difference between rural and urban experiences is brought to light in another way in a study published in JETIR [25] which has been brought to the fore by Chatterjee's own postings in rural areas. A separate JETIR study, which goes one step further than Chatterjee's novels in its criticism, takes his murder story as the extreme example and points to the change in the Indian family structure, cultural conflicts and the corrupt nature of the Indian bureaucracy, and shows how they all collectively constitute a mirror image of Indian society.

In *Weight Loss* this social critique goes personal. Chatterjee's protagonist Bhola, a senior civil servant who is obsessed with sex and physical fitness, has been interpreted as an analysis of a life without values and ethics, and sexual compulsion as a register for a much broader social and moral disorientation of the Indian professional class. The description of the novel in one of the booksellers' books tells us that the novel gives a rich picture of Indian society, tradition and the caste system and that even in his most sexually explicit novel Chatterjee's novel is in a specifically Indian social matrix.

Lastly, *The Mammaries of the Welfare State* puts the social critique into the state itself. R. P. Singh's initial review characterized the subject matter of the novel as the routine of the corrupt and depraved functionaries of the welfare state, a coterie of officials, politicians and hangers-on, whose venality Chatterjee documents tirelessly. In the time of COVID-19, a satirical depiction of the institutional and political failures to a real epidemic crisis had become far too relevant, and the novel's portrayal of Madna as an eerie glimpse of the community facing an epidemic seems to have been anticipated by Chatterjee [26].

4. REPRESENTATION OF INDIAN CULTURE

Indian culture is always a part of Chatterjee's treatment of postcolonial hybridity. The notion of a colonial and postcolonial subject as formed in the space between competing cultural codes provides a useful framework for reading Agastya Sen, who is alternately known as Agastya, August, Ogu or "English" by others, a subject who has lived a life that is constantly interpellated between different cultural codes of his past and present, and a life whose very name carries the process of negotiation. The reference to foreign cultural elements in the August synopsis, which Chatterjee likens to Peyton Place and Waiting for Godot, reminds him his uncle, who warns him that the first thing one is reminded of by something around oneself is something obscure and foreign, points out Encyclopedia.com in its entry on Chatterjee.

KBS Krishna's study expands on this theme, as his desire to be born Anglo-Indian and his disorienting experience in a Shiva temple, where the ritual worship of the women around him is unfamiliar, demonstrate a protagonist alienate from the culture of his birth. A paper published in JETIR also highlights how the novel illuminates the westernisation of all aspects of life, how it brings together Indian and Western culture in Agastya's life. Das's study in the International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences is framed explicitly in terms of postcolonial theory, claiming Agastya Sen's hybridity to be not only personal but also

structural, because both Agastya Sen and the Indian Administrative Service, from which he was recruited, are both products of the colonial Indian Civil Service which were only partly indigenised after independence.

Chatterjee's prose is a cultural artefact that has been read as such. According to Encyclopedia.com, his code-switching and inscription of the banal and the colloquial defuse the hyperbole traditionally attached to the solemn, like death, making it part of ordinary life instead of melodrama. In response to such anxieties regarding the appropriateness of serious Indian fiction in a colonial tongue, as several critics cite approvingly, Chatterjee has himself insisted that English is an Indian language, and that his own literary practice is a response to this. In his postmodern elements in the select novels of Chatterjee, Barasara Brijesh focuses on the hybrid nature of the language and situates it within the larger postmodern sensibility, arguing that Chatterjee's fractured structures in his narratives, ability to be self-reflective and ironic, and lack of tidy moral resolutions place him in the realm of postmodern English fiction in India rather than exclusively in the realm of realism or nationalism. B. Viswanathan's monograph-length study[27], Upamanyu Chatterjee: Postmodern Culture and Its Traces, takes this argument further into the novelist's work, interpreting the aspects of postmodern culture in Chatterjee's novels as a continuous authorial attitude, as opposed to a casual stylistic effect [28].

Finally, humour and satire are cultural tools of the fiction of Chatterjee. According to a study written by Vidhyayana, Chatterjee uses humour in particular to bring to light the politicians and bureaucrats' attempts to emulate the lifestyle and mannerisms of the western world, thus turning humour into a means for cultural critique, instead of entertainment [29]. A parallel study, on the theme of Indianism in Chatterjee's selected works, reads Bhola in *Weight Loss* as representative of a postmodern Indian youth – with much promise but lacking in roots – who is culturally disoriented, and in which such cultural disorientation is the novel's central theme [30].

5. POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE NOVELS

The political consciousness of Chatterjee's best work is in the satirical method he displays in August, and his most explicit in *The Mammaries of the Welfare State*. The novel is a long satire on the Indian government, detailing the corruption, incompetence and evilness of those who govern India in tedious memos, pointless regulations, silly acronyms and committees

whose only purpose is to provide jobs for the civil servants [31]. Agastya Sen's return to Madna in the novel is accompanied by a companion review that sees Chatterjee mainly satirizing the political landscape, on which the protagonist's own bureaucratic tribulations – eventually, a transfer to a body whose acronym appears to be as deliberately constructed as a joke – are subject of broader institutional parody [32].

In the chapter-length study, Krushna Chandra Mishra re-reads English, August as a demand, if you will, for the moral rehabilitation of the postcolonial civil service, calling for the need to "overhaul the bureaucracy" in free India to ensure dignity of living promised by the Constitution of free India [33]. This demand is embedded in a Gandhian belief that art should serve the society in Indian context as the satire of the novel points towards a normative articulation of the idea of postcolonial state to be. This demand is entangled with a Gandhian principle that art should serve the society in the Indian context, and despite being dark in tone, the satire of the novel ultimately points towards a normative idea of what the postcolonial state is to be. A similar argument is advanced in Mohamad Akram's study of the concept of welfare state in Chatterjee's fiction where he notes that the "idea" of civil service turns into a complex system of self-serving privileges instead of public service in the India that Chatterjee portrays [34]

In a more recent and theoretically ambitious reading published in *Kurdish Studies*, the vocabulary of satire and corruption is replaced by a discussion of 'necropolitics' — or the 'neglect, delay and moral indifference' of the state's exercise of power [35]. Together, this reading shows the failure of the ideal of the Indian bureaucracy to be a failure, but a structural violence in which the state is not making things worse, but rather creating suffering and disposability. The same study explicitly sets itself apart from what it describes as "the dominant critical tendency" to view corruption and inefficiency as "moral failings" rather than "forms of power," pointing to previous readings such as those that focus on satire and grotesque exaggeration in the *Mammaries* as examples of this more descriptive, thematic approach to criticism.

This political reading is not limited to *Weight Loss*, its ostensible topic being sexual compulsion. According to one evaluation of the novel, Chatterjee uses the body as a metaphor with surgical precision, and that obesity and compulsive appetites of Bhola mirror the state of the Indian state itself, which is similarly bloated in the novel with inertia, corruption and rituals

that no longer sustain them [36]. The study of Nidhi Nema on latent irony in explicit grotesquery in the novel also demonstrates the excesses as a rhetorical strategy without taking it as a sheer shock; it is an analysis which shows that the grotesque body is a medium through which social and institutional critique is made. The reviewers were indeed divided, though admittedly less than in the case of the Encyclopedia.com review, which in its commentaries noted that the sexual aspects of the novel were "just tiring" and not "illuminating," a comment that reminds us that Chatterjee's political and cultural criticism has not been unchallenged in the reception of the novel [37].

As several critics point out, Chatterjee's political vision cannot be easily divided into parties. His satire is directed not at any particular party or ideology, but against the evils of bureaucrats and politicians of all types—his main characters are flawed members of their respective system, not its villains who can be found on the outside. Some critics have then suggested that his political fiction is not just polemical reformist writing but rather acts as a form of political witness, recording the way things are without offering a specific agenda for change

6. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES AND RESEARCH GAPS

Now, looking at the above criticism, there is a certain picture that emerges and there are some gaps. The first is the fact that so much scholarly attention has been paid to English, August, and, to a lesser degree [38], *The Mammaries of the Welfare State* [39], while *The Last Burden* has received significant [40], but more narrowly familial, readings, and *Weight Loss* has been read for its sexual explicitness [41]. The novels of Chatterjee written after 2020, as well as the *Way to Go* [42], *Fairy Tales at Fifty* [43], *The Revenge of the Non-Vegetarian* [44], *The Assassination of Indira Gandhi* are considerably lesser explored in the peer-reviewed journals and books studied here and appear mostly in reviews in the journalism literature rather than in academic literature [45]. This imbalance is an indication that there is a need for further research, filling the critical comments that have already been made on the earlier, more studied novels, with the more recent and less studied book by Chatterjee.

Secondly, the criticism can be categorised into three methodological approaches that seldom overlap, thematic-descriptive studies, that record Chatterjee's treatment of the idea of the family, of corruption and westernisation; postcolonial-theoretical studies, that read his fiction within the framework of hybridity, mimicry and the postcolonial state; and a smaller, more recent strand of criticism that brings specific critical vocabularies to bear on individual novels

such as affect theory or postmodernism or necropolitics [46]. The necropolitical reading in Kurdish Studies explicitly acknowledges this division as a “deficiency” of current scholarship, as it was absent of sustained necropolitical readings of Chatterjee's bureaucratic fiction until the present study comes along. Similar disparities are found on the cultural front: though a few studies mention Chatterjee's linguistic hybridity and code switching, only a few make a systematic linguistic or stylistic analysis. Theoretically, Salman Rushdie's thoughts on the condition of the postcolonial Indian writer in English and Edward Said's larger work on the discursive production of the East are used here only in a partial way to examine Chatterjee's fictional work. In the literature examined here [47] [48] there are only partial applications of Salman Rushdie's reflections on the condition of the postcolonial Indian writer in English and Edward Said's larger work on the discursive production of the East.

Third, none of the studies reviewed here tries to interpret Chatterjee's approach to society, culture and politics as a critical corpus as opposed to three thematic strands. But family disintegration studies in *The Last Burden* are not often linked to studies of postcolonial hybridity in *English, August*, nor is the specifically political critique of the welfare state developed in the sequel linked to the hybridity studies in that same novel. The most integrated reading of the novels, however, which sees the JETIR study as arguing that the novels as a whole reflect the transformation of the family, cultural conflicts, and the corruption of the bureaucracy in modern India, is largely descriptive and fails to elaborate on a coherent theoretical approach to the question of why each of the three areas should be read together [49]. The Indian family, Indian cultural identity and the Indian political-administrative order are all at once implicated and not distinct issues in the fiction of Chatterjee as the same protagonists who betray their ageing parents in *The Last Burden* also displease their own elders in the same professional and westernised cast that run the corrupt welfare state of the Mammaries and the directionless and compulsive civil administration of *Weight Loss*.

Fourth, comparative and contextual scholarship, which places Chatterjee in the company of his peers, is not very developed. Thematic studies of the links between Chatterjee and Amitav Ghosh [50] and Shashi Tharoor and Rohinton Mistry with the comparative reading of *English, August* by Rupa Bajwa and *The Sari Shop* by KBS Krishna are helpful but limited examples of a comparative reading that might be expanded to other works of contemporary Indian English fiction. Since the seminal histories of Indian English fiction by Meenakshi Mukherjee and M. K. Naik were composed before Chatterjee began his career, further literary-historical

work is possible which would formally position his work in the post-1980 context of the history that these texts outline [51-54].

7. CONCLUSION

The present review has explored the significant but unevenly distributed criticism of Upamanyu Chatterjee's fiction, grouping that criticism under the headings of his portrayal of Indian society, Indian culture and Indian political life. In just about his dozen novels, and over 40 years of writing, Chatterjee has doggedly pursued a limited range of themes: the gradual erosion of the joint family system in modern India; the unassimilated hybridity of an Indian professional class that has grown up in the shadow of English rule and developed an English education; and the testamentary dysfunction of a political and bureaucratic system that Chatterjee, as a serving IAS officer, has known so intimately. While earlier scholarship has shed light on each of these issues individually, it has been much less successful in reading them together as aspects of a continuous critique of Indian modernity. The weaknesses that emerged in this review, namely, the lack of interest in Chatterjee's later fiction, the lack of an integrated approach to reading society-culture-politics, the lack of a robust comparatives, and the relative weakness of comparative studies, suggest a fruitful agenda for the future. Such research would more thoroughly utilize the theoretical means available in postcolonial and cultural theory; those of Bhabha, Said, Partha Chatterjee and Rushdie, and, remaining grounded in the close textual and biographical scholarship that already has laid the factual and thematic groundwork for Chatterjee studies. In any case, what comes out of the present review is a portrait of Upamanyu Chatterjee as one of the more than ever perceptive novelists of the postcolonial Indian life in English.

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