

The Futile and Absurd act of bureaucracy in Upamanyu Chatterjee's novel the Mammaries of the Welfare State

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Literature represents life experiences in a creative way. Human life is full of all types of uncertainties. It is uncertain from its birth to death. Human life is meaningless also. It is meaningless in spite of its engagement with all kinds of meanings.

Upamanyu Chatterjee is one of those novelists whose imagination is sensitively involved with the darker sides of life. Indian conditions of human life are so despicable, so full of miseries and maladies, so full of absurdities and purposelessness that any sensitive creative writer would depict these aspects of life in his or her creative writings. Upamanyu Chatterjee has depicted the absurdity of life, the miseries and disease of life in his novels very poignantly and vividly.

The Mammaries of the Welfare State (2000) is often considered as the sequel to the English August. It is more a collection of loose episodes than a carefully structured novel. Chatterjee's satire in this novel is sharp and the descriptions of life are full of the sense of futility. There is hardly anything in human life that is enjoyable. He picks up all the parts of the welfare state and suggests that the life is meaningless and disgusting in its essence.

The whole novel is replete with the episodes of agony, frustration, nothingness and futility. Agastya as a vehicle of expressing and exploring the anti-heroic life of people. Vijay Nambisan remarks-

The Mammaries of the Welfare State is a much bigger and much weirder book than its precursor. Agastya Sen is older now

but just as shiftless, minor characters drift in and out when you least expect them in again there is not even the excuse of a lot, because really nothing happens expect a lot of bureaucratic obfuscation (Nambisan).

The novel begins with the housing problem. In this novel the prominent figure is Agastya, a joint commissioner. In spite of this post he is alone and he does not find any happiness anywhere. Even though he is hard working and sincere, he is not satisfied by his job and day by day his life becomes mundane and futile. When he feels boredom, he cries silently.

When he was alone, he found himself leaning back in his desk chair or resting his head against the armrest of the lumpy sofa in his office that served as his bed, shutting his eyes and weeping silently.

This novel begins as Agastya, protagonist, has passed eight years as a civil servant. Now he is a mature and experienced person and the District Magistrate of Madna. Though he's still a bachelor, yet he has consummated his relationship with a widow, Daya. The novel further unfolds multitudes of adventures/misadventures, annoyance and exasperation of its protagonist who is surrounded by the corrupt hypocrites and sycophants and his helplessness to cope up with the prevailing circumstances as well as his inability to challenge them.

Chatterjee further explores the status of their relationship stating that, "Their attitudes to their affair differed. In her own way, she wanted a romance a lover, some

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music and conversation –whereas he simply wished to get rid of his day. Yet they were happy together – and surroundings, the atmosphere of flat, encouraged happiness”. This section ends with his transfer as a Collector of Madna to fight the plague.

This part of the novel introduces three important characters – Bhupen Raghupati, Rajini Suroor, and Miss Lina Natesan Thomas. It opens with the news of plague in the district town of Madna; it is a big news for various newspapers. In different parts of the country, people react differently to the news but the Chief Revenue Divisional Commissioner and Agastya’s boss-to-be focus more intensely on Love-Like-Hate-Adore game and all of them fantasize about Miss Lina. She is a trainee junior administrator in the Ministry of Heritage, Upbringing and resource management. This part also features Miss Lina’s long letter to the Secretary about her problem in the mentioned dept. The portrayal of her character is very ironic and humoristic. Her working condition is deplorable:

When she had refused Deputy Secretary O.P. Chadha’s offer to function from out of his lap, he had arranged for Miss Thomas one chair and one half of a desk in a fifteen-by-fifteen room on the fourth floor between the Gents’ Toilet and the canteen of the Department of Mines. The smell from the toilet and the canteen had been her faithful companions week after week, had mingled in her consciousness and at their most potent, had every now and then blended to make her swoon.

Agastaya firmly believes that these kinds of expenses and extravaganzas at the cost of public money are against the

principles of Welfare state. He thinks that Prime Minister should meet face to face the bottom of the pile instead.

Agastaya himself had found concrete evidence of at least eighteen cases in which poverty had forced families in the block of Jompanna to sell themselves, literally body and soul, as bonded labourers for seventy-five rupees per year, Every day, in other words, those families woke up and, in return for some scraps of food and water, worked in the fields and homes of their masters till they died, and after which their heirs inherited their burden.

Agastya also points out that the representatives of welfare state do not raise the real issues of common man; they either talk of issues related to their own interest or issues which have nothing to do with the grass root realities, for example, Mr Gaitonde’s agenda.

Our agenda for the Prime Minister’s visit, Collector Saab will include A. C. Raichur setting fire to himself in public, in protest against the conclusions of Kansal Commission; my party will also raise two issues of finance with the Prime Minister. That since the district of Madna didn’t have a helipad; one had to be built just for his visit. Two: twenty lakhs has been given to the Madna Civil Hospital to clean itself up for his visit. Our Civil Surgeon is mentally not equipped to handle such a vast sum of money.

The story move forwards with specific and elaborate details of the meetings in view of the visit of PM. These meetings were time – waster, ridiculous and discuss most insignificant things such as:

How many in the helicopter? Who were the others? The exact time of arrival. Was Bhanwar Virbhim part of the entourage

or was he now officially in some other camp? Would the PM's food taster be on the flight? Where was lunch? Was the helipad to be sanitized twenty-four or forty-eight hours before the landing? Could they presume for heavens' sake that the police would not insist on photographs on the temporary identity cards? No VIP enclosure at all? Did they know what they are saying? Would this route to Aflatoon Maidan skirt the plague or pierce through it why don't we set up Committees for each macro event etc.?

Eventually this portion ends with the announcement of the PM's decision to withhold his visit which wind up all the clamour and brouhaha in the government machinery of Welfare State.

Agastaya suggests on the phone to the Under-secretary that he be summoned to the capital fourteen hundred kilometres away to report, in person, to the Centre on exactly what happened in broad daylight to Rajani Suroor along with Civil Surgeon of Madna, Dr Alagh.

The corridors of Aflatoon Bhavan had once been a handsome five metres in width, but over the years, the cupboards, desks, chairs, electric fans, coolers, shelves, sofas, stools, teapots, clocks, folders and files had edged out of the twelve- hundred-plus rooms and sidled along down the passages in search of lebensraum.

Chatterjee further enunciates the condition of integrity and honesty in the Welfare State in the contemporary society:

There have been times when completely honest—and comparatively honest officers Agastya Sen, for example, and Dhurbo Jyoti Ghosh Dastidar, Kumari Lina Natesan and Harihara Kapila —have wondered whether they are in fact as honest

as they've always thought themselves to be —the idea of honesty having become more and more slippery with the years —and secondly, what good being honest has done them.

The story end with the arrival of Miss Lina in Madna as a General Secretary of Tetra pack a new party that Dhurbo and Agastya had finally come up with, the party that would get rid of the country of the plague and takes its name from a medicine tetracycline; and Suroor's subsequent death.

The rules of the state system on corrupt civil servants like Bhupen Raghpati, plundering of public treasury and collapse of governance are the recurring motifs in this novel. The novel presents a chilling view of the happenings in the cold- blooded immoral world of the bureaucracy, the bureaucracy which is detractively supposed to work for the poor. The message is that the state is the big anti-hero, which has completely lost touch with the masses and the individuals who control and operate the system. Upamanyu Chatterjee as a realist concerned with the fate of the individual caught in the grip and anti- people system cannot probe deeper into the workings of this system.

The Mammaries of the Welfare State is a mirror in which the multi-departmental decay and depravity of the Indian state gets reflected in its bitter details that are horrifying. The title is quite suggestive in the sense that it conveys the resourcefulness of the corrupt elements managing the politics and bureaucracy to milk the system in their own personal interests. The welfare state is the suggestive of a country with all resources, seemingly inexhaustible land of abundance which needs to be milked by the people in power.

After that the dominating presence in this novel is of the anti- heroic deeds of the mandarins and politicians of the welfare state, the purpose of this novel is to display a canvas of sordid deeds. The novel is long and rumbling. A key and highly placed mandarin of the state Bhupen Raghupati explains to one of the politician Makhmal Bagai the value of the separation between the rulers and the ruled in the cold surgical words- “Sit on the moon, and in the cold blue light, gaze down on the remote, quite, somber, beautiful and tranquil earth distance provides perspective and objectivity”.

The Mammaries of the Welfare State is a large vista of rottenness. It is the product of a creative mind which believes that overcoming rottenness is conditional upon its ruthless examination through presentation. It unmistakably points to world that is absolutely turned upside down

in terms of moral values. It puts forward Upamanyu Chatterjee’s ‘concept of the antihero. He sees the world as a place in which conventional religion appears to be in collusion with the exploitative tendencies of the powerful. Being a social realistic, Chatterjee appears to stand in the line of those Indian sensitive minds who have tried to explore the actuality of the religio-spiritual claims of Indians. Upamanyu has exploded the myth of The Welfare State by exploring the corrupt, inefficient bureaucracy that rules the country. The existential condition of the individual Indians and the nation-state is brought out very vividly by the novelist.

Primary Sources-

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