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Phase 2 -The idea of the welfare state in upamanyu chatterjee's fiction

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Abstract

The idea of the **welfare state** is one of the major themes in the fictions of Upmanyu Chatterjee. Being an IAS officer he very much stresses the point of the welfare state. Through the protagonists in the novels Chatterjee tries to show the significance of the welfare state amidst the ambiguity and gloom of the protagonists. He shows that how the heroes of his novels themselves ridicules the “waffle”.

Keywords: Upamanyu Chatterjee, Indian State, English Language

1. Introduction

Literary scholarship has traditionally invested superiority in the tragic hero over the hero of a comedy. Such an assumption, even when it concedes not to conform fully to the Aristotelian precepts of tragedy, is founded crucially on one factor: that conflict is the making of the hero whose mission is ultimately to resolve it. The resolution connotes the triumph of the hero. But this triumph is a moral survival that looks beyond the inevitable physical or physiological extinction of the hero. Comedy insists on the survival of the hero in physical terms at the end of a work.

2. A brief Study on Welfare State

The frustration of Agastya, his ambiguity finds a brilliant exposure when he asked to himself:-

“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” ^[9].

These lines also show the futility of administrative service especially for Agastya. Upmanyu Chatterjee has finely expressed the views of Agastya at Madna through several word-pictures and symbols. The pent up feeling of Agastya is further revealed when Mr. Srivastav reminded him the conditions and ambience of Madna:-

“Oh, mosquitoes, yes, I can see that from your face’. A quick side- glance at him. ‘I tell you, Madna must be one of the unhealthiest places in India. Hot, humid, disease, everything. Are you boiling your water? I told the naib tehsildar to tell you’ ”. ^[10]

What better picture of the dismal condition of Madna as well as of Agastya can we get? Indeed, the problem of mosquito biting, the problem of water, the dust ridden roads, meagre foods and the shabby guest house add more to the existing frustration of Agastya. He has been actually trapped between ‘to be or not to be’. The dilemma in him leads to more dismal situations as is expressly hinted in every line of the novel. To Agastya-known to his friends as August, or sometimes English-he has been sentenced to the back of beyond. Seemingly overwhelmed by the heat, this slow -moving novel goes on to describe Madna’s petty officials, the pretensions and day-dreams of its citizens, endless governmental meetings, hilarious dinner parties, much drunkenness and boredom and bureaucracy. To amuse himself, at times, Agastya makes up stories about his past: He confides to the District Inspector of Land Records that his (non-existent) wife is a Norwegian Muslim and that his “parents were in Antarctica, members of the first Indian expedition. Yes, even his mother, she had a Ph.D. in Oceanography from the Sorbonne.” To the Superintendent of Police he casually lets slip that last summer he climbed Mount Everest. Even the food everywhere seems inedible. At one meeting at Gandhi-Hall he is handed a plate: -

“On it were laddus, samosas and green chutney. He could almost hear the chutney say, ‘Hi, my name is cholera, what’s yours?’”

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Refusing the food, he explains to the waiter: –

“I can’t eat anything today. My mother died today’. The man looked puzzled again. ‘I mean, this is the anniversary of my mother’s death, and I fast’. For a moment he contemplated adding, ‘In penance, because I killed her’.”

All these things add to the grotesque kind of humour which Agastya enjoys during his stay at Madna. These are a sort of a comic relief from the dry, drab life of the town where restlessness, purposelessness, cyclic journey hover him throughout the day and night. He finds no respite even at the guest house or in the collectorate. However, Agastya’s character, as evident in the novel seems to be more ambiguous and round than the other persons in the fiction. He has had a kind of an ‘incalculability of life about’ as E.M. Forster rightly asserted in his book ‘Aspects of Novel’. His heroism is not at all a journey of valour rather he inculcates in him the compulsions of the post-modern man. His heroism cannot be compared with the heroism we find in Tom Jones or in Pip in ‘Great Expectations’, rather he is, as already said, a common man eyeing to have the material world at the best. Similarly, the second novel ‘The Last Burden’ is a fascinating portrayal of life in an Indian middle-class family. Jamun, the central character, is a young man, unmarried, adrift. He stays away from his family, which comprises his parents, Urmila and Shyamanand, his elder brother Burfi, his sister-in-law, Joyce, his two nephews (Doom and Pista) and the children’s aya. Jamun returns to the family when his mother is hospitalized. Once there he decides to stay on until one of his ailing parents dies. He barely admits to himself that there is another, probably stronger reason for his extended stay in the family home—an old friend Kasturi, now married and pregnant, who has returned to the city. The ordeal of Jamun starts from the very beginning of the novel:

“In the four days Jamun emerges at twilight for cigarettes and potatoes, milk etcetera. Otherwise in the white rooms of his flat he reads the Gandhi life and hears the rain. In the afternoons the waters slip away under the cauterizing sun. Then the white rooms glut with the exhalations of mud-of fish and sea, the beach and the wet. In the early mornings, from his verandah he observes the cream crabs in the ooze on which the block of flats has been erected. Later in the month, the river will ballon and Hegiste on the ground floor will share his flat with it. At night he hears the polite tap-tap beyond the windows, in the swelter, in the rain”. ^[11]

So the extended paragraph of the novel, or to say, the very beginning gives us the dismal picture of struggle and wisdom and the way through which he combats with life in all sorts of activities. The lines also focus the point of Jamun’s initiation of a journey, the end of which is bottomless or eternal. He starts a journey from ignorance to knowledge without knowing the path in which he walks. So also these lines altogether symbolise the iron determination as well as the frisky nature of the protagonist. Chatterjee tries to give the hint of the ambiguity of the character in the present paragraph. He never tires from the ongoing difficulties or the impediments that fall in between the journey of the protagonist. The way in which the character is presented is well noticed by the readers because the beginning gives us the shock, the way in which the character gives his vent to the outer world, captures the attention of the readers as well of the critics. The critics are of opinion that the opening

paragraph categorically foretold the story of the rest of the novel. Not only that the opening paragraph also comprehensively discusses the way in which a quasi- hero is developed. As we had a prolonged discussion at the beginning of the chapter that how should we categorize the heroes in Chatterjee; especially at a time when he wrote, the time was ripe to portray the waywardness or the purposelessness of a person. The post-modern thinkers are also of the opinion that the character of Jamun unfurls the historic vision as well as the ambiguity or the multi-faceted characteristics of the particular protagonist. In a way we can say, that the character of Jamun summarily follows the way of a post-modern man. Some more examples from the text would suffice the point:–

“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 rutted 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 life”. ^[12]

3. Result

The important as well as comprehensive verse-paragraph (as we must say verse because of its language larded with symbol), shows again the minute observation as well as the lived experience of the novelist.

4. Notes and references

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