

Joint Ventures: A Commentary on Health and Urbanisation and the Use of Marijuana in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August: An Indian Story*

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Abstract

This paper locates Upamanyu Chatterjee's debut novel *English, August: An Indian Story* (1988) within a framework of critical health humanities and provides a commentary on the healthcare infrastructure prevailing in the "hottest town in India"- Madna. Healthcare provision in India is a multifaceted issue encompassing multiple challenges and opportunities and this is reflected in many of the casual conversations of the characters and through the technique of stream of consciousness in the novel. The fictional rural towns of Madna and Jompanna are scattered with a diverse range of population with remote healthcare access and insanitary practices, which serve as a sample for the degrading condition of healthcare practices in rural villages of India.

In this work of fiction which touches upon the aspects of existentialism, upper middle-class diaspora, autobiographical elements and corruption in the Indian Administrative Services, Chatterjee projects a controversial and absurd hero in the character of Agastya Sen, also known as August, who uses marijuana to escape from the mundane realities of his life in Madna. His use of marijuana creates a sense of numbness and euphoria amidst the monotony of his bureaucratic job and the suffocating conservatism of small-town India. The banal narrative and the frequent use of the word marijuana in the pages compels the reader to scrutinise the character's reliance on this substance leading to an existential despair. This paper will explore the condition of health practices in the small town and the use of marijuana as a coping mechanism to deal with the monotony and disillusionment of the protagonist.

Key words: health practices, marijuana, disillusionment, existentialism, cultural dislocation

Introduction

Upamanyu Chatterjee's 1988 novel *English, August: An Indian Story*, is a humorous and irreverent review of bureaucracy and its relation to the protagonist – Agastya Sen. In the novel, Agastya is a bureaucrat, a middle-class officer of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) stuck in small-town India. His character sparks significant criticism on account of the frequent use of the words “cannabis” and “pornography” in association with a person of his rank. Spivak's subaltern argument of an alternative vision of subaltern agency is offered through a close study of narrative voice. The tantalising subtitle enumerates the dialectic between “English” and “Indian”, which dominates the narrative. In the opening pages of the novel, Chatterjee purposefully draws attention to the hybridity of his protagonist who desires to be English and hence earns the nickname August (Shandilya, 2014).

A distinctive feature of this novel is that nothing significant happens during his purgatorial year in the provinces of Madna and Jompanna. The readers do not find the usual pleasures of an unfolding narrative, and this is evident from the outset of the novel which reads- ‘[t]he district life that [Agastya] lived and saw was the official life, common to all districts, deadly dull’(27). This novel, full of its anti-proairetic tendencies, drives Agastya to enter a ‘purely iterative existence...where the direction and movement of plot appear to be finished’ (Scott, 2012). Over the course of the novel, Agastya's life becomes progressively dominated by routine, further disrupting the narrative's forward trajectory. Everything he does, he does repeatedly, ritually, day in and day out, until it is not just the narrative's energy that comes under threat but its very narratability - for as Barthes observes, “to repeat excessively is to enter into loss, into the zero of the signified”. Moreover, the protagonist faces an identity crisis courtesy of his cultural dislocation. This cultural dislocation arises on account of alienation and displacement of the habitus of the protagonist. The stark contrast between his upbringing and his current rural environment highlights his cultural hybridity and confusion, pushing him more towards an existential angst. The predictability of this monotonous bureaucratic life in Madna leads Agastya to cope up with the aids of cannabis and pornography.

The stress and coping mechanism theory of Lazarus and Folkman focuses on the varying ways people manage a stressful situation, cannabis being one of them. This paper will attempt to analyse the theme of the use of cannabis as the protagonist's coping mechanism by employing Lazarus's psychological stress theory. By employing the diverse theories of cognitive appraisal, coping strategies and reappraisal, a complex interplay of reflections will exemplify how the protagonist grapples with the demands of their environment while seeking to maintain a sense of self in the face of adversity.

Literature Review

Extensive scholarly investigation has been conducted regarding the text's postcolonial aspect. Bhaba's idea of ‘mimicry’- the subjects's belief that the mere imitation of European/English standards will bring them the luxuries enjoyed by the colonial master and uplift them from the status of colonised subjects to the true citizens of the empire is emphasised through the selected

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text (Shafeer and Kathiresan, 2020). On a similar note, Reiner's study discusses the social and political milieu in the society. He argues that Chatterjee's novels throw a satirical light on contemporary Indian problems, which include political, economic, sexual and drugs corrupting the youth (Reiner, 2018). Furthermore, Upamanyu Chatterjee explores aspects of the Indian bureaucracy with many a 'tongue-in-cheek' expression and black humour (Raju, 2013). Existentialist philosophers have analysed the text through the lens of Camus and Sartre, attempting to trace an existentialist crisis or dilemma in the postmodern text (Rekha and Alapati, 2016). Man has been totally indulged in his materialistic pursuits but a sense of alienation and a search for one's identity and belongingness come naturally with this materialism and unprecedented technological advancement. Upamanyu Chatterjee has beautifully delineated the existential crisis, alienation and identity crisis of modern youth in his maiden novel (Kalra, 2022).

However, this paper evaluates Chatterjee's *English, August* from health humanities point of view with particular attention involving the use of marijuana within the narrative.

Manoeuvring Cannabis in India

The use of hallucinogens for recreational purposes has been documented in literature since Homer's epic *Odyssey* in which Odysseus comes across a group of mysterious people living on a small island who customarily consumed lotus plants that cause them to live in a perpetual state of bliss. While Robert Burton does not explicitly mention hallucinogens, he talks about opium, mandrake and henbane in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, published in 1621. The use of mind-altering substances is also found in other literary texts such as *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821) by Thomas de Quincey, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) by Oscar Wilde, 'Kubla Khan' (1816) by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley and the mandatory Beat Generation or the Beatnik Subculture. While Indian authors have not explicitly ventured into the world of these psychoactive drugs, its role has been illustrated in social interactions as a part of the cultural fabric. Cannabis or Ganja is one of the psychoactive drugs which will be explored in this paper. Cannabis is one of the five sacred plants mentioned in the Vedas and is associated with Lord Shiva. Also used in traditional Indian medicine, it occupies a sacred place in Hinduism and is consumed during festivals like Holi and Mahashivaratri. Hindu ascetics or sadhus perpetually use cannabis to aid meditation and attain spiritual enlightenment. Its use in folk medicine and its regulation in modern post-colonial India has been an issue of contention. The decision of the protagonist to consume cannabis can symbolise the rejection of conventional lifestyle and an exercise of personal freedom, challenging societal norms and expectations.

So how did a drug which was socially consumed, become a symbol of personal freedom and was criminalised in a country which has a rich history of the use of cannabis? The British government first investigated the use of cannabis and combined it into a report named Indian Hemp Drug Commissions Report in 1894. The findings concluded that moderate use was relatively harmless and recommended regulation rather than prohibition. The British introduced regulations and taxes on cannabis production and sale, reflecting a pragmatic approach rather than outright prohibition. Cannabis continued to be used widely, albeit under a regulated framework. Post

independence, the Government of India passed an act, the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, 1985 which criminalised the production and sale of cannabis resin and flowers but allowed the regulated use of bhang, which was seen as culturally significant. However, the drug was negatively portrayed in popular culture till the 2000s, associating it with upper class hippie culture or as an intoxicating substance used by criminals. This novel, set in the '80s, navigates the consumption of cannabis as a form of recreation and later on, as an escape from the humdrum of his life.

Existential angst and the Effects of Cultural Dislocation

Under the circumstances of the newly formed NDPS Act, the character of Agastya Sen, in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August*, which was written just a few years after the act, uses cannabis to escape his mundane bureaucratic life in Madna. Martin Heidegger's concept of Dasein or being-in-the-world resonates with Agastya's profound sense of alienation and displacement. The abstraction of *geworfenheit* or thrownness describes 'humans' individual existences as being 'thrown' (*geworfen*) into the world'. It underscores the idea that individuals find themselves in a particular world, culture, and set of circumstances without any prior choice. This condition emphasises the randomness and lack of control humans have over the initial conditions of their existence. In this novel by Chatterjee, the character of Agastya is thrown into the unfamiliar environment of Madna which forces him to transition from the familiar and westernised urban environment in Kolkata to the crude and unsophisticated life in Madna. Agastya's inability to relate to the people, customs, and daily life of Madna reflects Heidegger's idea that thrownness often leads to a sense of not-belonging. Furthermore, his predicament is aggravated by the original sin and his leaving the job, the former being the marriage of his Hindu father with a Christian mother. This is evidently highlighted in certain paragraphs in the novel such as

“‘Well, my mother wore saris and ate fish like a Bengali,’ said Agastya lightly. He had no desire to reveal anything of himself to Bhatia. ‘My parents were married for about seventeen years, long enough for my father to really colonize her. I was born very late.’ His aunts had been triumphant, his father had said, when his mother had not conceived — this is what comes of trying to mix Goanese and Bengali blood. ‘I hardly remember my mother.’ He smiled to deprive his reminiscences of any hint of sorrow. ‘In my blood runs a little feni, or something like that, but that's about all.’” (92)

His sense of alienation can also be expounded by his sense of cultural dislocation. Cultural Dislocation is defined as ‘the removal of a person from a location organised by a particular set of cultural practices and placing them in another location organised by a substantially different set of cultural practices – can shock and alter the ego’. Pierre Bordeau's concept of ‘habitus’, ‘capital’ and ‘field’ can be used to provide a framework for the understanding of cultural dislocation in this context. Habitus refers to the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that individuals acquire through their life experiences. It is shaped by one's social and cultural background and influences how individuals perceive and react to the world around them. Agastya's coming to terms with his new environment is the direct application of Bordeau's

transposability of the habitus. His frequent use of cannabis and pornography serves as an escape mechanism, allowing him to temporarily detach from the reality of his situation and the oppressive atmosphere of his bureaucratic duties. The use of the word cannabis in five sections of the novel proves his sense of alienation and dependence on the substance to navigate a world marked by randomness and contingency.

Marijuana as a coping mechanism in the novel

Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman define stress as “a particular relationship between the person and environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources or endangering his or her well-being.” The Lazarus theory identifies two focal points in any psychological stress theory- appraisal and coping. Appraisal is the individuals' evaluation of the significance of what is happening for their well-being whereas coping is the individuals' efforts in thought and action to manage specific demands. (Lazarus, 1993). The concept of appraisal was introduced by Anne Arnold and expedited how individuals evaluate situations to determine their emotional responses. Lazarus further divides appraisal into primary appraisal, which concerns whether something of relevance to the individual's well-being has occurred and secondary appraisal, which concerns coping options.

Lazarus and Folkman identified two types of coping: problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping includes acting and doing something proactive about the problem. Thus, one might gather resources, talk to others, or take some action to change the situation. Conversely, emotion-focused coping is the ability to recognize that, if the situation is deemed uncontrollable, then it should be left alone, with more focus placed on managing one's emotions (which can be controlled). The protagonist in Chatterjee's novel, chooses the former and embarks on his journey of consuming cannabis and pornography to come to grips with his reality.

Chatterjee's expertise in camouflaging symbols is noticeable when the protagonist, Agastya says: 'Just near the Collectorate he saw cannabis growing wild. That was nice and, he smiled, somehow symbolic' (20). The symbol of the wild cannabis in the quoted text symbolises two things- the first being rebellion against existing social norms. Agastya, being an IAS officer, is expected to be a role model in the society. However, his use of cannabis symbolises passive resistance and a way to assert his individuality in the face of rigid and often hypocritical societal standards. The second, underscores a relationship with nature amidst the artificiality and rigidity of bureaucratic life. Cannabis, in the novel thus, serves as a multifaceted symbol encapsulating Agastya's inner struggle and his quest for authenticity and purpose of his life. The theory of narrative medicine can be employed in this aspect to justify the use of cannabis by the protagonist, instead of comparing him with pre-determined societal norms.

As a Commentary on Health and Urbanisation

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“It was like a caricature of a shabby clinic, something out of a TV serial that desired to be realistic. A hospital bed half-hidden by a green hospital screen, beside the bed a large cupboard with ointment boxes and strips of pills oozing out of it like toothpaste out of a split tube. On the walls, calendars from pharmaceutical companies, one showed a woman in a sari laughing while running beside a tonga, from which all her friends were looking down at her and laughing back” (184-185). This rather bleak description of a clinic in the ‘hottest town’- Madna, points towards the ignominious condition of the healthcare system in rural India. More subtle hints of the abominable health system of India is scattered throughout the novel and it is observable through the intricacies of the conversation between the different characters. Through the depiction of this hospital, Chatterjee critiques the Indian health policies and priorities of the Indian government. This physical decay mirrors the broader inefficiencies and desuetude within the bureaucratic system that Agastya encounters throughout his tenure. The hospital suffers from a severe shortage of medical supplies, equipment, and trained staff. This lack of resources is emblematic of the broader underfunding and mismanagement of public health institutions in rural India. The inadequate resources lead to substandard care and contribute to the overall sense of despair and futility experienced by the characters. The staff at the hospital, including doctors and nurses, are often portrayed as incompetent or indifferent. Their lack of motivation and skill reflects the systemic issues within the healthcare system, where corruption, apathy, and bureaucratic red tape hinder effective service delivery. This incompetence further exacerbates the poor condition of the hospital and the suffering of patients. Thus, this novel brings to the fore the neglect of rural healthcare and the urgent need for systemic reforms to address the disparities in healthcare provision. Hippocrates wrote in *Airs, Waters and Places* that human well-being is influenced by the totality of environmental factors, living habits or lifestyles, climate, topography of the land, and the quality of air, water and food. This explains the reason for depreciation of health of the residents in the rural villages. Doctors and healthcare professionals are often reluctant to practise in rural villages on account of various factors including financial disincentives, lack of various amenities, workload and demand and personal preferences. Programmes should be created to address this dearth to improve healthcare facilities in the remote and rural villages of India.

Conclusion

The use of literature is still confined in the prison of reductionism. This analysed novel offers a nuanced observation on the dwindling healthcare system in rural India and people’s ignorance towards modern healthcare facilities. Rather than romanticising rural life, Chatterjee portrays the polarity between the metropolitan city of Delhi and the rural town of Madna. Agastya’s existential crisis and his heavy dependence on cannabis to get through his rural administrative journey underscores the tension of this polarity. Cannabis, for him, becomes more than a mere substance, and its presence in the narrative offers a glimpse into his coping mechanism. Agastya’s dependence on cannabis can be rationalised with the stress and coping theory by Lazarus and Folkman. His feeling of cultural dislocation, owing to cultural shock and language barrier all contributed to his sense of alienation and eventually consumption of marijuana to cope up with the situation. Through the portrayal of the characters and the vivid description of the landscape of rural India, Chatterjee critiques both the pressures of urban life and the various means individuals resort to, for exploring their identity and a means to venture isolation.

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