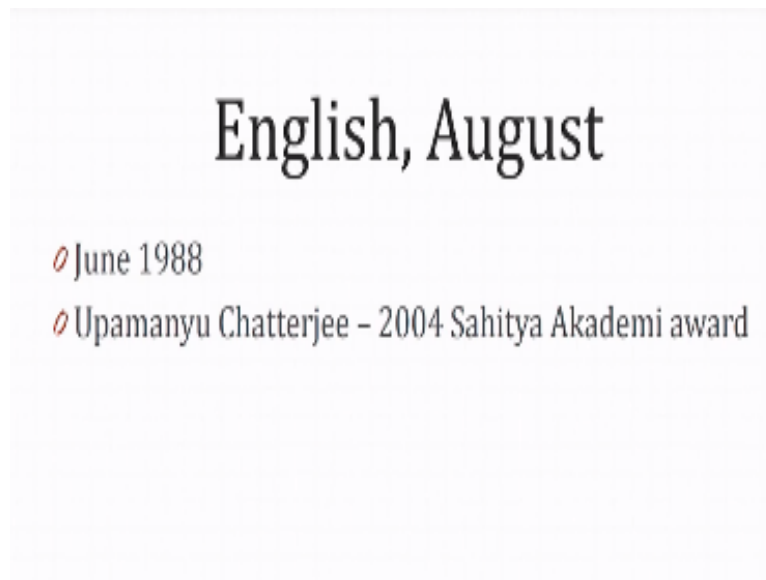


Indian Fiction in English
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Lecture – 32
English, August by Upamanyu Chatterjee

Good morning, I am happy to welcome you to yet another session of the NPTEL course, Indian fiction in English. In today's session, we look at this novel by Upamanyu Chatterjee title English August, this was a highly successful novel and Upamanyu Chatterjee also went on to win the Sahitya Academy Award for a Booker for another work at a later period.

(Refer Slide Time: 00:41)



And the normal English August was published in 1988 and in 2004, our Chatterjee also won the Sahitya Academy Award are the success; the interest that this novel has elicited across a wide range of audience had been quite thrilling and this is a hilarious novel, it is an easy read, so unlike the difficulty that some of the post Rushdie or the post Koch generation of novelists present to you.

(Refer Slide Time: 01:18)

Who is Agastya?

- ◊ An urban Indian male - educated
- ◊ Dislocated from all around him
 - ◊ Has a family – not the kind of alienation in Billy Biswas
- ◊ A careless disinterest in people and everything
- ◊ An irreverent take on everything
- ◊ Peculiar to novelists who are middle class and English educated
- ◊ A product of the CBSE system of debased empiricism
- ◊ What has education given Agastya?

This is one such novel which could also come across as a highly accessible and with an extremely hilarious kind of a rendition, we do have student presenting today about this novel giving a detailed insight and understanding of English August, ah as a proprietary remark to that it is important to understand, who Agastya is; Agastya is an urban Indian male, he is also quite highly educated.

He went to one of the prestigious schools centre, colleges and also cleared the Indian, the coveted prestigious Indian civil service exam, we find that he is dislocated from everything around him yeah, everything and everyone around him and this is what marks Agastya August as a very different person all together, it is the kind of alienation and the kind of distancing that he experienced this is not similar to that of a Billy Biswas from Arun Joshi's novel.

Unlike Billy Biswas, we will find that Agastya holds on first job, he has a family but at the same time, there is a way in which he manages to stay away, the word is perhaps you know, stay rootless, stay dislocated from everything around him, he has only a careless disinterest in people and everything and even about himself to such an extent that he lies extensively when asked about his family, he lies to others.

He tells people that he had a wife who had died of cancer yeah to someone else, he would rattle on with this story about his wife who eloped with somebody else, so he is someone who just does not care and he can perhaps afford that that is a point that we will come to address very soon and he also has an irreverent take on everything, he seems to belong to a generation which cannot take anything seriously.

He is holding an important position as far as his administrative job is concerned, he is an IAS officer posted in the rural; one of the rural hinterlands of northern India but we find that he is unable to take an interest in his job or on anything which is happening around him and he does not take himself his job, all the people around him seriously, some critics have wondered whether this kind of a portrayal is peculiar to novelists who are middle class and English educated.

We do find his tendency at least in some of those novelists to present protagonists who are dislocated, who are rootless from the contemporary and immediate realities around them and some have argued that the likes of Agastya, our products of a CBSE system of debased empiricism because it does not encourage you to engage with things, it only prepares you to retain information and produce them as and when required, which is what Agastya also does quite meticulously in spite of his disinterest.

In spite of him being buried in his own self pursuing his own pleasures, we find that he is able to quite meticulously retain the administrator of a hierarchical nodes, he knows what to do about the procedures, he has a; he is quite efficient that way that it is impossible to find fault with him and this question of what education has given Agastya is something that he should perhaps also attempt to ask and answer based on your reading of the novel.

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Agastya's social background

- o Privileged
- o Someone who can afford to live like Agastya
 - o Marijuana, masturbation, and meditation - the luxury and the time - The right social/cultural capital
 - o Even the right to violate a tribal woman? ✓
- o "Caste and creed were no bar, but these categories determined your share of the Stephanian experience" (Tharoor)

And Agastya's social background is very privileged, he comes from a fairly well off family from an urban setting for someone to be able to afford to live like Agastya, it does require a

privileged background and there are 3 things which seemed to interest him; marijuana, masturbation and meditation, these are the things that he does on a daily basis in spite of this high profile job that he holds.

And the strange thing is that he does not find any need to change himself and the novel presents these 3 things as a continuous obsession that Agastya has but it does not really interfere much with his job, it does not threaten his stability in terms of a job security or in terms of an economic stability because he has the luxury and the time for reasons obvious privilege being one of those, he also belongs to the right social and cultural capital.

And he is able to afford to enjoy all of these things and be irreverent and remain dislocated without really threatening the many securities which hold him together and that is a brief episode, where Agastya ends up violating a tribal woman, the episode is not focused centrally because it is also presented as an inevitable need because Agastya is forced to live in an otherwise sexually frigid zone.

So, is it in the same privilege which is given him even the right to violate this woman and then go almost scot free after the incident, there is certainly a connection between the background and the kind of things that he ends up doing that he is allowed to do and that he can afford to do, in one of the rules writings responding to whether there is a Stephanian literature or not, he points this out.

Caste and creed were no bar but these categories determined your share of the Stephanian experience given that the author of English August Upamanyu strategy is also a Stephanian, it is not possible to see an interesting connection over here that caste and creed while we remain insignificant to this urban privileged young man, we find that those categories also determine his share of life experiences.

They also determine his choices and the ways in which someone like Agastya can get away from many, many things, which would perhaps mean the end of life for someone who is less privileged, someone who is not as privileged as he is.

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Where is Indianness here?

- An introduction to civil administration - for the Indian or western audience?
- Very urban jokes - a disconnect with the non-urban?
- Feels out of place in 'India'
- A form of 'orientalizing within India' (Aditya Bhattacharjea)
 - Eg: Goan/Anglo-Indian - used interchangeably - seeing Christian, Anglo-Indians, Goas as undifferentiated

As we are talking about English August in the context of Indian fiction and English, it's important to ask this question about how we can locate Indianness in this work, one of the critiques about English August is that it was written for a Western audience, it is export quality prose, we find a detailed introduction in this work, an introduction to Civil Administration yeah whether this is for the Indian audience or the Western audience is debatable.

We find a similar account, a similar telling in Shashi Tharoor's novel, riot right as well where we are also introduced to the intrinsic systems of Indian caste system and the intricacies of how the administrative business operates, there we of course have another foreign character non-Indian character, an American woman to whom the character of Lakshman is introducing India and the many inside a details of India.

But again one begins to wonder whether this is for this, whether the intended audience is native or foreign, the jokes come across is very, very urban. In the jokes that Agastya cracks with his friends or the kind of things that he finds humorous in a day to day context, they would perhaps make sense only to an urban audience who share a similar background, there is a total disconnect with the non-urban setting where they may perhaps even fail to see the humour, fail to see the relevance of many things that Agastya things about an does on a daily basis.

Though, Agastya is placed within India, though he is an Indian citizen himself he did his entire education in India and he is thoroughly Indian in that sense, he feels out of place when he is in rural India and this is an interesting point because there are only certain regions within the

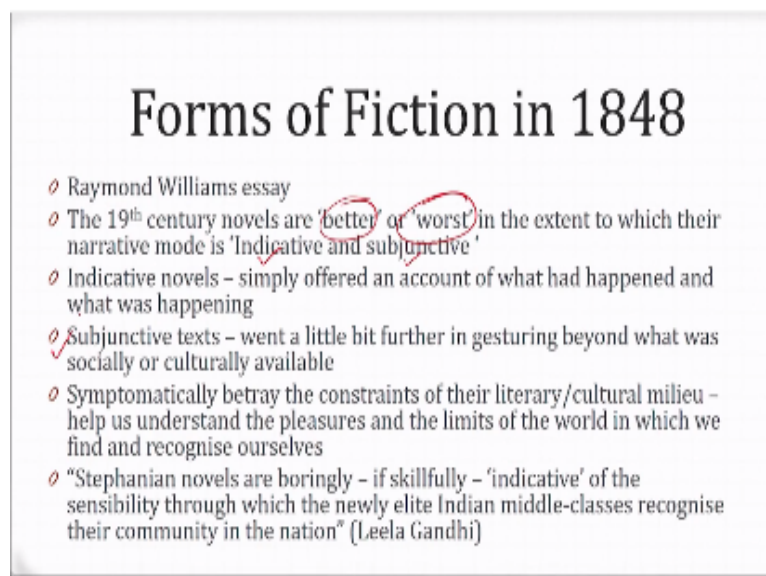
nation where one would feel comfortable as a person one would find that there is something shared with the others from that area.

And certainly, the place where Agastya is posted now is a place with which Agastya shares nothing in common, he feels completely out of place, he is unable to find a friend and he always feels that he is an alien over there doing something which neither he nor the others are able to figure out and this form of depiction has also invited a lot of critique. Aditya Bhattacharje has referred to this as a form of orientalizing within India.

And this is not really about the place not really about the place, where Agastya is posted as an IAS officer but it is also about the attitude, the also about the disinterestness in understanding what the; what the rest of India is about, what the other is about for example, there is an instance where he interchangeably uses the character of August; Agastya, interchangeably uses go in an Anglo-Indian.

This tendency to see say for instance, the Christians, the Anglo Indians, and Gohans as undifferentiated, it also amounts to an orientalizing tendency within India as far as Aditya Bhattacharje, Walter critiques is concern.

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Forms of Fiction in 1848

- ◊ Raymond Williams essay
- ◊ The 19th century novels are 'better' or 'worst' in the extent to which their narrative mode is 'indicative and subjunctive'
- ◊ Indicative novels - simply offered an account of what had happened and what was happening
- ◊ Subjunctive texts - went a little bit further in gesturing beyond what was socially or culturally available
- ◊ Symptomatically betray the constraints of their literary/cultural milieu - help us understand the pleasures and the limits of the world in which we find and recognise ourselves
- ◊ "Stephanian novels are boringly - if skillfully - 'indicative' of the sensibility through which the newly elite Indian middle-classes recognise their community in the nation" (Leela Gandhi)

As I wind up these prefatory remarks, let me draw your attention to an essay by Raymond Williams, title; forms of fiction in 1848. In this essay forms of fiction, 1848, Raymond Williams attempt to analyse the 19th century novels to find out whether they are better or worst and this is based with respect to the extent to which their narrative mode is indicative or subjunctive.

I find this distinction useful in certain discussions about novels like *English August*, Lee Leela Gandhi also refers to these 2 modes of narration in trying to evaluate the Stephanian novels. Indicative novels according to Raymond Williams, they simply offered an account of what had happened and what was happening, there is nothing more or nothing less to it, it is about a series of incidents that had happened and a series of incidents which are continuing to happen.

There are no surprises here for the reader; the reader is familiar with what is being presented with what is being narrated. On the other hand, the subjunctive text, Williams argues they went a little bit further in gesturing beyond what was socially or culturally available and by doing that they also symptomatically betray the constraints of their literary cultural milieu, the literary cultural background, thereby helping us to understand the pleasures and limits of the world in which we find and recognize ourselves.

So, of course there is a familiar element even in the subjunctive narrative mode but located in this familiar world, we are also encouraged to understand the pleasures and limits of the world which we ourselves inhabit and then Leela Gandhi uses Raymond Williams essay to bring in an important evaluation in the context of fast Stephanian novels. She writes Stephanian novels are boringly, if skilfully indicative of the sensibility through which the newly elite Indian middle classes recognize their community in the nation.

So, there is nothing subjunctive about Stephanian novels including *English August* which is what Leela Gandhi seems to indicate because they do not gesture anything beyond what is socially or culturally available and the true mark of a novel like Raymond Williams pointed out whether a novel is better or worse is evaluated on the basis of many such things. I resist from making an evaluation over here, while I attentively agree with Leela Gandhi.

There was also no denying the fact that this is certainly a novel, which brought in a different narrative mode to the body of Indian English writing but however, this distinction seems to be a useful one while trying to see how we would look at fiction, written particularly in the post 1980's to try and see how they are pushing beyond their boundaries, how significant the kind of liberation and the kind of radical narrative thinking which they brought about are in the contemporary.

With these, I also invite Anand Ajith for sharing his views and his insights on his reading of this normal English August, I encourage you to read the novel, so that you would get a complete sense of the discussion and we will be able to relate better with the many points which are being raised and discussed, thank you. Good morning, I will be presenting on Upamanyu Chatterjee's debut novel in published in 1988, which is called English August.

And about a young Indian civil servant, an IAS officer who is posted in a place called Madina, a fictional village which is on the hinterlands of rural India to complete his Civil Service officers training. We could of course say that it is a postmodern novel in some senses but also some review says that say realist novel but the basic idea is that it tells the story of a man who is rootless.

And caught in a vicious mental state of his own that he does not know how to come out of it. So, basically what happens in the novel is that there is a person who is interested in nothing and who thinks it is a virtue or at least we believe so, so it is the story of a sensitive man caught in the reality of the world, he is trying hard to reconcile his inner world with outer world and that is the sense of the story.

I will read out something from the novel that the in certitude of his reactions to Madina, his job and his inability to relate to it other abstractions to his place in the world his future, the illusive mocking natural happiness, the possibility of its attainment, so these are the problems that he is contemplating throughout the novel and so what does he do when he is bored but he cannot find meaning in what he is doing in the place.

There are 3 things that this guy resorts to although, he does know that it is not going to fulfil him, so there is marijuana, masturbation and meditations, his name is Agastya Sen but he has urged to be westernized as in he grew up in a school where the vice versa or western, so that he always had a urge to become western, so his friends smoking him used to call him August or English.

So, even the title of the book English August is actually referring to Agastya himself, so he is very rootless, uncategorized and uncertain and this uncertainty fills the novel as in if you read you can know that this novel is not going anywhere, the novel itself is uncertain, so it is the

character and so it is the intention behind the novel, it is very uncertain, so we are looking at his journey from rootlessness and uncertainty to yet rootlessness and uncertainty.

So, this day is a very urban Indian male child who is currently 24 years old and he cannot come to terms with the reality of a world which he always thought existed just in documentaries about the poor and movie so, when he has to confront that reality what goes in his own mind is main theme, what Upamanyu Chatterjee says is very interesting that he keeps on repeating that this novel is not about India, this is not novel, it is not about the places.

It is not about the politics, it is completely about a guy who is lost, so it is a very human novel in his intention if we have been to go by what, Upamanyu Chatterjee says, he is also rootless because of his upbringing, in the sense that he is the child of a quiet wealthy family, self from a quite wealthy family like Goaness Christian mother, a Bengali Hindu father brought up in Delhi, now posted at madina, who studied in some place which must be very close to Darjeeling.

So, he cannot make sense of himself or his world, so this is a common idea of a genius who is constrained to the time and space of modernity, the people he meets in Madina, the bureaucracy and also the poor people, so there are only 2 kinds of people who he meets if we are to make categorization for the use of understanding. So, one is the kind of people who are less than him, so less than him in the sense they are very corrupt while, Agastya is almost straightforward not always but yeah.

So, or else the people are worse than him, worse off than him in the sense of their material surroundings and etc., etc., etc. so, Agastya slowly comes to understand that everybody's life is more or less similar to him in the sense that they also do not know what to do, they also does not know where to look up to and etc., etc. but what makes Agastya different from the other people is the kind of authenticity, if we are to use the existentialist term.

Authenticity in life that you do not go before after false beliefs, so that the idea is to be authentic to face life, so that is Agastya said does throughout the novel, so that is what makes him quite different. The primary thing is that there is no unfolding narrative, there is no plot, there is no Freytag's triangle which you see with a rising action falling action etc., etc., so it is much like a diary entry or a journal, it is very all over the place.

So, to speak that what matters only in the stories that is some banality of non-occurrence nothing happens, nothing happens throughout the novel except we are the narrator or the reader is following Agastya Sen through his job through his training through his problems, through his almost depressed conditions, through the nights which he just lies down on his bed and stares on a ceiling and smokes weed.

So, that is what goes throughout the novel, we have a very interesting observation that the life of an IAS officer, the life of the bureaucracy is very similar to something that happens without nothing happening really, the officialness of what happens quietly seeps into the story which makes the story itself seem like a mini bureaucratic world where there are just delays and roadblocks and still delays and still delays and still delays that the story is emptied of significance.

As if there is a filter through which everything that he sees, he is passing through and everything that gives meaning, he is sucked up by that filter that Rowland pack says that there is a dilatory area in every text where nothing much happens but it serves to give a context and a grounding to the text but apparently this novel as we would argue is fully a dilatory area from cover to cover.

Also, there is a distinction between a priority code and a hermeneutic code on in reading the text that what keeps somebody's attention to a text is whether something happens, whether somebody can ask questions on why this happened, what is going to happen next, what would he have done etc etc. so that part of asking questions to keep the text moving is called the priority part.

So, we argue that the novel does not have that part that gives us glue to the novel, so there are so many references to other texts within the novel such as Bhagavad Gita and Marcus Aurelius meditations, so one of the course is that many branched and endless are the thoughts of the man who needs who lacks determination, so that is from Gita, so this same exact quote is provoked so many times over and over in the novel that the lack of determination and the endless ways in which the mind wanders.

And curiously, the first beginning sentence of the novel also repeats once more as it is in the middle of the novel, so if we are to read the novel keeping in mind Indian ethos, we can see that in circular, the very much like *Finnegan's Wake*, which begins with half, the beginning sentence half, the endings sentence, so goes on in a circles while this is not about the country, this is not about a community.

This is more; this is of course about a person but the Indianness is on the background always, most times it is used to provoke a comic relief to the novel but there is an irreverent take on Indianness that the rootlessness and alienation which are the main themes of the novel, it always comes from having known India as something else too, the narrator knows multiple worlds of what India is and without India as a background, the novel bring out progressed.

So, while Upamanyu Chatterjee says that is about; it is only about the person, it is the formal structure of the novel always takes India into consideration making so many crude jokes about India at times but that is how the novel progresses. So, on some versions of *English August*, there is an introduction by Akhil Sharma introduction to the novel, so he says that what is problematic with Indian fiction in English when we try to talk about it is that most of these works try to pretend that that is the sole or representative of the Indianness in the Indian fiction.

While it should be really focusing on the fiction, it is turning out to be pretentious about being Indian, so Meenakshi Mukherjee in authenticity that paper says that Chatterjee had to add the title; at the subtitle an Indian story to this novel, so the entire title is *English August an Indian story*. So, the problem with the reading of this thing as a boring text is that maybe the author of this paper was trying to see a mean sense relation in reading a text that when you approach a text there should be a meaning which you can take out of the text after you have read it.

But the idea is of *English August* you cannot make sense of it in a summary or a review or a paper, it is the experience that one has to go from the cover to the end cover, so but when the novel ends, we still do not have Agastya getting rooted somewhere, he is still very, very uncertain about what happens and etc., etc.