

Exploring Identity and Individuality in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August* and Rupa Bajwa's *The Sari Shop*

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Abstract:

Identity becomes a problematic issue, especially in the modern era, where it clashes with individuality. The failure to fit into categories prescribed by societies leads to crisis of identity. This crisis is experienced by people of all classes. The article looks at two Indian novels in English – Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August* and Rupa Bajwa's *The Sari Shop*, where a civil servant and a shop attendant struggle to discover their identity in a world where divisions are watertight.

Keywords: Identity, Individuality, Individualism, *English August*, *The Sari Shop*,

Identity and individuality are not necessarily mutually exclusive; however, in cultures such as India with their penchant for classifying citizens on the basis of caste, creed, gender, religion, region, race, etc..., often the two are at odds leading to nagging doubts of self-worth in many and identity crisis angst in a few. The paper proposes to study two novels (belonging to the ever-growing canon of Indian Writing in English) to bring out how such anguish is not limited by class, culture, or even education. The two novels under purview are Upamanyu Chaudhary's (b.1959) *English, August* (1988) and Rupa Bajwa's (b.1976) *The Sari Shop* (2004). However, it is not as if these are the only works that have dealt with or delineated this problem: Works ranging from the first Indian novel in English, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's (1838-1894) *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) to recent works of fiction such as Jerry Pinto's (b. 1966) *Em and the Big Hoom* (2012) have portrayed this. The novels analysed for this paper are chosen not only for their moving portrayal of the torment faced by the protagonists due to identity issues but also due to the wide chasm that divides the protagonists. Hence, the depiction of this problem is suggestive of a far deeper malaise inextricably interwoven into the cultural fabric. While identity crisis is not a current issue, modernity has brought its own set of issues that have a bearing upon one's self-identity. An integral characteristic of modernity is globalisation, which "in one form or another, is impacting on the lives of everyone on the planet, whatever their age, class, ethnicity, gender or whenever they live" (Beynon and Dunkerly, 1979, p.3).

Chatterjee's Agastya Sen is a civil servant, who struggles to come to terms with his rural environment, after being distanced from his familiar urban roots. From the very beginning of the novel, Chatterjee shows how the protagonist is not able to relate to or identify himself with his surroundings. The problem starts with Agastya's name itself. Agastya is not comfortable with being called by his name; and his friends, relatives, and others call him either Agastya, or August, or Ogu, or English, depending on how they perceive him. While a few persist in calling him by his given name, and even take offence at the fact that the protagonist does not have adequate respect for a revered name from Hindu mythology, others give him various nicknames, or include his profession as a part of his name.

The protagonist's name is significant as it is not just a name that is at question here. While Agastya harkens back to Hindu mythology, August seems to refer to Augustus Caesar, the Roman emperor. So, while the protagonist *ala* Shakespeare's Romeo probably believes that 'a rose by any other name would smell as sweet' (p.912), the readers and the other characters in the novel do not think of it in the same manner.

This is because names suggest identity: They hint at one's religion, creed, and even gender, in most instances. Agastya being indifferent to what he is called is a symptom of a deeper sense of rootlessness.

Early in the novel, Chatterjee points this out when he stresses that August wanted to be an Anglo-Indian. The protagonist's communication, bearing, and desires, make him the butt of ridicule in his school days as his classmates could sense that he did not want to be what he is. Even in his childhood, August desired to be an Anglo-Indian rather than an Indian. He '[...] wished he had been Anglo-Indian, that he had Keith or Alan for a name, that he spoke English with their accent' (Chatterjee, p.2).

The identity that this would provide him with is what he wanted. However, what identity does an Anglo-Indian have? An Anglo-Indian, by definition, is an Englishman who is born and brought up in India. However, an Anglo-Indian cannot be one of the aborigines, and similarly cannot be an Englishman either. Hence, Anglo-Indians, are generally neither at home in the country of their birth (that is India), or the country that they seem to belong to due to their race (that is England).

August by desiring such an identity shows that he wants to fall between what Chatterjee says are two stools. August wants to be something like Ruskin Bond's (b.1934) Rusty in *A Room on the Roof* (1955). While Rusty is an Anglo-Indian and suffers from identity crisis because of that very reason, August, rather weirdly, desires such an identity.

This desire for an identity that does not anchor itself to a tangible and well-defined category can even be seen in August's attitude towards religion. August on his trip to a temple along with his associates at Madna, is not able to relate with the *poojas* being performed by the women. When Mohan blasphemously compares the *pooja* performed in a Shiva temple to a pornographic film (Chatterjee, pp. 127-28), August is not offended at his friend's words as he himself felt that the *pooja* was a weird experience:

There was a tube-light in the innermost sanctum directly above the black stone phallus of Shiv. There the wives came into their own.

They took turns to gently smear the shivaling with sandalwood paste, sprinkle water and flowers over it, prostrate and pray before it, suffocate it with incense, kiss their fingers after touching it. Agastya found the scene extraordinarily kinky. (p. 128)

But August is oblivious that he is being sacrilegious by having such thoughts due to his upbringing, which did not stress either on religion or worship.

Religion was with him a remote concern, and with his father it had never descended from the metaphysical. [...]. Yet he [Agastya's father] had wanted his son to be a Hindu, for which his arguments had seemed sophistic. He had said that it would make the least demands on his time. 'You can think and do what you like and still remain a Hindu.' Consequently Agastya had rarely been to a temple.... (p. 128)

In, not only his attitude towards religion but also in, his attitude towards gender and profession August shows a certain lack of belonging. This is apparent when we see that he can joke about his gender. In his conversation with Bhatia, he speaks jocularly about suicide and gender transformation:

There are many indigenous methods of suicide. You could change sex, kill your husband if he doesn't die on his own, and burn yourself on his pyre, but I think Sati (Suttee to you) is prohibited -- they've killed a great Indian tradition, but there is a new one in its place -- you could change sex and marry, and get your husband to burn you -- the ultimate kink experience. (p. 77)

August's attitude towards gender as he points out how changing one's gender can lead to a kinky experience display not just an eccentric desire for entertainment, but also a sense of being uncomfortable with gender-based identity. This dialogue with Bhatia also reveals the bleak outlook that he has towards life, as August can only think of a husband and wife relationship as a game of one-upmanship where either the husband murders the wife, or vice-versa. Further, the fact that August jokes about suicide reveals that it is present in his subconscious, suggestive of frustration and depression.

This frustration becomes even more obvious when we look at his attitude towards his profession. He is an IAS officer in Madna; and such government officials are looked at with awe and admiration by the public. However, August does not share their outlook. On the contrary, he would prefer to do something that is not looked upon with such approbation: "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" (p. 13). In fact, he even writes to his father saying that he would prefer a change of job.

August also has a problem with the place that he works in. This is because being an urban youth, he had hardly ever been to rural India, and finds Madna an incongruous place to live in. While on his first trip to Madna, he is stuck by the strangeness of the landscape:

Outside the Indian hinterland rushed by. Hundreds of kilometres of a familiar yet unknown landscape, seen countless times through train windows, but never experienced – his life till then had been profoundly urban. [...]. To him, these places had been, at best, names out of newspapers, where floods and caste wars occurred, and entire Harijan families were murdered, where some prime minister took his helicopter just after a calamity, or just before the elections. (pp. 4-5)

He comes to terms with this by treating his post at Madna as a short-term arrangement (p. 50). This sense of considering everything as transient is what makes August a character who basically finds solace in being rootless. In fact, he wallows in being rudderless.

Not just August, but other characters in the novel too such as Dhruvo, Neera, and Renu have identity crisis. Dhruvo cannot relate to his high-paid job as an executive in a foreign bank, and wants to go into the civil service. He confesses to August that the "[...] expense accounts, and false-accented secretaries, and talk of New York and head office, and our man in Hong Kong, it's just not *real*, an imitation of something else-where, do you know what I mean?" (p. 153)

Neera brags about losing her virginity, and thus shows a lack of bashfulness that is generally perceived to be common to all Indian girls (pp. 286-7). Renu, Dhruvo's girlfriend, breaks her relationship with him and goes abroad, saying that India is alien to her. However, she finds

the West equally alien. In her letter to Dhruvo, she shows that she now craves to be back in her motherland (p. 156).

Madan's sister, too, has a sense of displacement and cannot identify with her surroundings. She is poised to go abroad for her studies and speaks English with a put-on accent and behaves as if she is not an Indian (pp. 172-3). This is similar to August's college mate Bhatia, who was enamoured with the United States of America. August remembers him as an "urban Indian bewitched by America's hard sell in the Third World" (p. 75). Bhatia's "ambition had been to go abroad ('to the US of A'), perhaps to show it how well he fitted in with its lifestyle" (pp. 75-6).

Although all these characters share a sense of rootlessness, it is not as if they can relate to each other. Dhruvo's letter to August, while the latter is working in Madna, is self-centred, and does not have anything on how August is finding his new job or environment:

Not a word about Madna. Another universe; yet he had been part of it just two months ago; now disturbing in its complete difference. [...]. We are all cocoons, thought Agastya, with only our worries and concerns; Dhruvo should have sensed that I'd be as interested in his world, more or less, as he had been in mine. (pp. 118-9)

Dhruvo's letter naturally leaves August frustrated. But he is able to realize that everyone is cocooned in their own world, thereby suggesting that they are from different worlds, although both are Indian. This suggestion of more than one India is akin to what Carlos Bulosan says with reference to America. Bulosan is of the belief that

[...] there are always two nations in every nation: the dominant on-going nation, enchanted with its self-proclaimed virtues, values and glorious traditions, and another nation that exists on sufferance, half-buried, seldom surfacing, struggling to survive. (Bulosan, 1946, p. xxi)

In fact, Chatterjee states as much in the novel directly, when he speaks through Sathe, one of the characters that August encounters at Madna, that India does not have universalism. Sathe, while speaking about his cartoon project, tells August:

I wanted to suggest an Indian writer writing about India, after having spent many years abroad, or living there. There are hundreds of them -- well, if not hundreds, at least twenty-five. I find these people absurd, full with one mixed-up culture and writing about another, what kind of audience are they aiming at. That's why their India is not real, a place of fantasy, or of confused metaphysics, a sub-continent of goons. Why is that. Because there really are not universal stories, because each language is an entire culture. (pp. 47-8)

The issue with universality is that, while each individual is heterogeneous, there is a tendency to perceive any group based on gender, caste, religion, region, etc..., as homogeneous. Due to this, any generalisation based on such understanding results in individuals struggling with the identity that society has thrust upon them. Unless classifications of this kind cease, identity crises would continue to torment individuals. This is highlighted in Bajwa's *The Sari Shop*. In the novel, Bajwa depicts Ramchand leading a dreary life. However, he does not have too much of an issue with it as he is used to it. The novel begins with Ramchand in a hurry to get to the shop as he is as usual late.

By the time Ramchand looked at the little red clock on the table and realised that he was late, it was too late. He bathed and dressed in a hurry, dropping things all over the place,

scalding himself when he warmed water for his bath on the kerosene stove, fumbling with the buttons of his shirt and spilling hair oil on the already dirty floor. Finally, he ended up misplacing the heavy iron lock, along with the key stuck in it. (Bajwa, p. 3)

This depiction suggests that the job is important to Ramchand, without being overwhelmingly so. In other words, while he is scared of losing the job, it is not as if he is in an important and responsible position and needs to be on his toes all the time. Therefore, he could afford to forget his job and get late for work.

However, the verbs 'fumbling' and 'spilling' suggest that he was in a hurry, and intent on getting to the office. This behaviour is no different from the demeanour of others in similar positions. Thus, Ramchand is not unique in any way; but an ordinary man at the beginning of the novel.

Bajwa further stresses on this ordinariness by speaking about everyday lower class household items such as kerosene stove, hair oil, and heavy iron lock. These along with sordid adjectives such as 'dirty' create a picture of a squalid house. This squalidness is highlighted later in the novel, when Bajwa itemizes what Ramchand had bought in the last eleven years.

Ramchand had, in the course of the last eleven years, acquired a chair, a low stool, two buckets and a mug, two plastic soap cases – one for Lifebuoy soap and the other for a Rin detergent bar – a doormat, and a small mirror on the wall that looked very old. He kept meaning to get curtains too, but hadn't got around to doing so. The money fell short every month. (pp. 73-4)

This itemization brings to light the kind of poverty Ramchand endured. The fact that he could not afford to buy curtains show the stringent economic conditions with which he struggled. However, he has an idea as to what he is missing. This is unlike his colleagues who are satisfied with their wont. Bajwa brings this out clearly when she has one of Ramchand's colleagues Hari point out:

I say, it is a short life, and you never know what happens when. So just eat, sleep, watch films and have fun. While you can. And what more does Chander want? He has a job, no? Enough money for meals, no? Then? (p. 118)

Hari, though younger than Ramchand is more at peace with his life, is clear about his place in society and his ambitions match his abilities. Hence, he is quite content to earn enough to feed himself and occasionally go to the movies.

Ramchand, however, is different. Even earlier after a night out with his office colleagues, he is vaguely dissatisfied (p. 35). Not only could he not identify himself with them, but he also found them frivolous and vulgar. This is probably because of the difference in his upbringing. Although he lost his parents at an early age, he knew love and affection, and he could also remember that his father had chalked out a lifestyle for him that was completely at odds with what he was putting up with. Ramchand clearly remembered his father ordering him to study rather than waste his time:

Go away, go away. Go and study. Try to become something in life, unless you want to continue to measure out besan, pack up sugar and haggle with housewives for the rest of your life. And deal with suspicious customers who think you cheat them while weighing things out, who want to check your weighing scales for themselves. (p. 43)

Due to remembering these injunctions, Ramchand is not happy with his current life. It is tragic that he did not even become a shopkeeper as he is swindled by his uncle, and ends up in a menial position in a shop. However, Ramchand has hopes to better himself:

Tomorrow was a new day. He would change everything. He wouldn't lie about in a stupor that his thoughts always induced. He would start exercising so he'd be fit and healthy, he wouldn't be intimidated by anyone and he would stop watching those silly movies on Sundays with Hari and the others. [...]. And he would practice English-speaking in front of the mirror every day. (pp. 35-6)

These ambitions are fuelled by his trip to Kapoor House. For a long time his world was limited to the shop and his home. The trip to sell saris opens new vistas for him, and suggests to him that the world is full of possibilities (p. 70). While this realization is not particularly useful, the experience along with his inability to enjoy his colleagues' camaraderie roused his dormant ambition. Hence, he pulled out the plan that he had earlier chalked out for himself. Armed with an old Oxford dictionary, a book on letter writing, and a book of essays, he feels that he is well on his way to improving himself (p. 80).

By diligently working on self-improvement, Ramchand hopes to achieve success. However, his diligence does not lead to success. His quest to stamp his individuality on the world is curtailed by the identity society has bestowed on him: an uneducated and unskilled toiler. Hence, Ramchand's dream too is soon shattered.

Just as Ramchand's visit to the rich Kapoor House showed him the possibilities that are present in the world, his visit to the house of his colleague Chander's house and the squalidness and sordidness of the place opened his eyes to the unpleasantness of this world. Moreover, he also realizes that while the world is full of opportunities, these are limited for a chosen few:

What a grubby, mean little life he had! Or maybe *he* didn't have a grubby, mean life. Life was grubby. Grubby, mean, flabby and meaningless! Grovelling, limited, scared! Sick, sick, sick! And he was the same too! Just to be alive meant to be undignified, Ramchand thought, his stomach aching with acidity. Because it wasn't just about your own life eventually. What was the point of trying to learn, to develop the life of your mind, to whitewash your walls, when other people lay huddled and beaten in dingy rooms? Or had dark, dingy memories like rooms without doors and windows, rooms you could never leave. (pp. 111-2)

These feelings are further accentuated by his bookish knowledge. A book of quotations that Ramchand buys to improve his language skills points out to him the futility of ability. One of the quotes he reads while going through the various quotations on ability is by Napoleon. While he has no clue as to who Napoleon is, he finds the quotation particularly relevant.

Ability is of little account without opportunity – Napoleon

How true that was, Ramchand thought sadly, wondering who Napoleon was. Maybe a foreign poet. How right he was! He, Ramchand, would have gone to an English-medium school if his parents had not died. (p. 176)

This realization that ability does not have the final say in where one ends up in the world, and the feeling that life itself is grubby makes him depressed. This depression is heightened by his reading a quote on adversity.

God brings men into deep waters, not to drown them, but to cleanse them.

Ramchand snorted at this. 'Yes,' he thought scornfully, 'and sometimes He just leaves them in deep waters till they are wrinkled and shrivelled like a washerwoman's hands and are no good to themselves or to anyone else.' (p. 176)

At an earlier point in the novel, Ramchand is depressed on meeting Kamla, his colleague Chander's wife, who has gone to waste due to poverty (pp. 183-4). The quotations along with the gruesome knowledge that he gets of Chander and Kamla prove to be too much. He realizes the squalor surrounding him, and gives up trying to improve himself. Ramchand shelves his ambitions along with the books and the various armaments that he bought to improve himself.

He looked uncomprehendingly at the *Radiant Essays* he held in his hand, and down on the edge of his bed. And thought. Confused thoughts. Of paan-stained teeth. Of silk saris and gold. Of peacocks that danced. And of white sari flowers that, unnoticed by the world, had turned a rust-red.

With finality, Ramchand got up and closed the book, With an impassive face, and slow, decisive movements, he gathered everything he bought so enthusiastically a few months back – the *Radiant Essays*, *The Complete Letter Writer*, *Quotations for all Occasions*, *Pocket Science for Children*, the notebooks, the pen, the inkpot.

With a lump in his throat, he put them away in a neat pile on the uppermost shelf in the wall, a shelf he never used. A shelf where he wouldn't be able to see them. (pp. 189-190)

Bajwa, thus, suggests symbolically that while the ambitions and desires are present, not dead, they are hidden even from his view. Soon after this, Ramchand vents his anger and frustration at his manager and colleagues. He is struck by their pettiness and unfeeling nature when they talk about Kamla, and is shocked at the manner in which they take it for granted that she deserved what she got (p. 199).

However, his frustration is conveniently labelled by the manager as a drunk's ravings and he is forgiven. Even his anger is like a drizzle, as Bajwa symbolically puts it, and not a monsoon rain that heralds a seasonal change.

When Ramchand returned to his room, feeling slightly sobered up after the scene, it had begun to rain. It looked like the monsoon had finally arrived. [...]. However, the few raindrops proved to be a false signal. Even as Ramchand watched, the few clouds in the sky disappeared and the sun shone down again, as hot and cruel as ever. The monsoons were still not here. (p. 232)

Ramchand's hopes for a better future are destroyed because he is confronted with reality when he visits Chander's house and meets Kamla. The scary experience brings home to him the fact that he cannot hope to better himself for the simple reason he is not rich or influential enough to achieve his dream, and although he cannot identify with his colleagues he has to carry on working alongside them.

The ending of *The Sari Shop* is not all that different from *English, August*, as a sense of defeatism prevails. While Ramchand gives up his attempts to better himself as futile, August is unable to settle down, despite three, what he supposes at that time as, epiphanic experiences.

He first sees a salesman at the doctor Multani's clinic. He observes that this salesman works hard to earn his living. August feels ashamed that he, with all his advantages, does not take

his job seriously (p. 224). He has a second experience when he sees the work done by Baba Ramanna for lepers and wonders at the resilience of the lepers themselves and the Baba's work ethic and love for fellow-beings (pp. 235-6). Later on, he has a third epiphanic moment when he sees the joy on the struggling tribals' faces when he gets them water. He has a sense of fulfilment, a strange feeling for him. He realises he can do something, as he is in power (p. 263).

However, August is too warped in his thinking to change, and takes a year's break from the job. The last paragraph of the novel shows that August's identity crisis, is, in fact, more accentuated than before.

[...] he [August] opened Marcus Aurelius. 'Today I have got myself out of all my perplexities; or rather, I have got the perplexities out of myself - for they were not without, but within; they lay in my own outlook.' He smiled at the page, and thought, *He* lied, but he lied so well, this sad Roman who had looked for happiness in living more than one life, and had failed, but with such grace. (p. 288, italics mine)

The point that August does not believe Marcus Aurelius's sayings anymore suggests that he has now lost his last moorings. Aurelius is someone August had looked upto as God, as the capital 'H' in 'He' brings out. However, August is now completely alienated, even from Aurelius, as he believes that the philosopher had lied.

Alienation or identity crisis can be conquered by either having a dialogue or by universalism (Dallmayr, 2002, p. 20). However, as seen in the study of these novels, universalism is but a mirage; and even dialogue is not possible due to the lack of common culture or language. August is not able to speak with the natives of Madna due to language problems (Chatterjee, pp. 15-6), and Ramchand's attempt at relating Kamla's grievance to a supposedly humane person falls on deaf ears as she finds the anecdote 'filthy' (Bajwa, p. 213). Both August and Ramchand are left alienated, and having identity crisis.

Their situation is suggestive of a universal malaise, as these novels show that identity crisis is not specific to any gender, class, profession, etc.... Moreover, in India, "caste, religion, language and even rivers and mountains are conflicting symbols of Indian identity. Freedom is mortgaged for self-interest and identity is a bargaining posture to extract political mileage" (Mohanty, 2009, p.228). Hence, where an individual is alienated for having distinctive traits, we are left with either clones or angst-ridden citizens who ask 'whither individuality?'

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