

CONTEMPORARY URBAN REALITY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE'S THE MAMMERIES OF THE WELFARE STATE

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to explore the contemporary urban realities in Upamanyu Chatterjee's novel *The Mammaries of the Welfare State*. Literature is termed as the mirror of society because it projects the influence of the contemporary age while depicting human nature. A writer is the creator as well as the creature of the age in which he exists and works because he portrays certain virtues for the people to emulate and Upamanyu Chatterjee is no exception. He is one of those writers who excel in depicting the contemporary social and political situations. He has given a vivid account of bureaucrats, politicians and raised many issues like corruption, loss of values, lack of true human relationships, sexual perversion, mental tension, housing problems in urban areas etc. His novel *The Mammaries of the Welfare State*, the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award winner, is a sequel to his first debut novel *English, August: An Indian Story*. It beautifully presents the Indian bureaucracy's proneness to corruption and moral turpitudes and leaves no opportunity to mock the entire administrative as well as political world. He is a social realist and doesn't believe that literature should only be for enjoyment rather he firmly believes that literature should confront the facts of actual day today life. His novels are written in a humorous style but they are a bitter satire on Indian Administrative service and corrupt politicians.

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In the novel, *The Mammeries of the Welfare State*, the central character is again Agastya Sen who is the chief protagonist of Chatterjee's first novel but this time he is a little bit somber and serious. In the prequel, the focus was on Agastya and his attitude towards life but in the sequel the mirror is on Agastya's surroundings though his feelings of loneliness, boredom and restlessness are depicted from close quarters. He is still having illicit relationships with a forty year old widow named Daya and this shows his urban bent of mind where there is no regard for traditional values and he lacks the warmth of relationships. Both of them are involved on physical plane and there is no love lost between them. Morality and ethics are the words just found in dictionaries for them not in real life. Agastya has the irresistible desire to pursue personal happiness and pleasure with little thought of morality. Here the novelist raises the question which is complex as well as universal one concerning close relationships arising especially dysfunctional families.

Agastya is inefficient in delivering what is expected from a high official rather he feeds himself on the body politic of the welfare state. He is the protagonist who is utterly incapable of coping up with the pressures of the system which he belongs, and yet he found it impossible to change or leave it as he says, "Because within the civil service, one is likelier to know somebody who knows somebody who knows a cop" (Chatterjee, 26). He found that the world of reality is less funny and more challenging and if he has the government job; he has job security and he can continue it without performing the duties which have been assigned to him. His friend Dhrobo who is an executive in Citi Bank is preparing for Indian Administrative Services because he thinks that within the civil service one gets a peon, a personal assistant and an Ambassador car in free of cost. It shows bureaucrat's tendency to use public property for personal benefits i.e. peons who get salary from the government but made to work for private purposes. Instead of leading the nation towards development bureaucrats and politicians are interested in fulfilling self interest.

Through Agastya's life the novelist shows the predicament of the modern youth who are caught in the complex web of urban life and snapped ties with tradition; they are caught in a dilemma of socio-political and socio-culture matrix of the present day life. Chatterjee's fictional world is based on his real life experiences and the novelist has presented them in front of his readers without any imaginative flavor. In urban life, people have to face the problem of space for living and the same problem is highlighted in the very beginning of the novel where we found Agastya facing a housing problem. He manages to get a room in Raj Atithi House which is a fourteen story building which is separated by a five foot wall from the garbage dumping area and whole picture of the living condition seems disgusting as the novelist puts it, "The wall stretched four rows of the barbed wire, from various points of which sagged torn polythene bags of different colors. These contained human shit in different form of decomposition" (Chatterjee, 6)

The title of the novel is quite suggestive because it conveys the resourcefulness of the corrupt politicians and bureaucrats to milk the system for their personal interest rather than for the welfare of the poor. It is also ironic in the sense that all is not well in the welfare state because the politician and bureaucrats are not interested in public welfare. The politicians, contractors, bureaucrats and mafias has made money through using the political system and they are interested in the continuance of chaos so that they can use it for their personal benefits. The welfare state is not doing anything for the welfare of the low class workers;

thousands of rupees are spent without any regard in renaming districts, ministries or states which can be used to uplift the level of common people who doesn't have the basic necessities of life and working day and night to fulfill their basic requirements. Lacks of rupees are spent on press conferences by so-called civil servants and political leaders.

The novel shows the collapse of socio-cultural institutions in addition to the politico-bureaucratic proneness to corruption. The character of Baba Mastram shows the disturbing nexus between bureaucracy and politics. It shows the unholy collusion of the politically powerful and the claimer of the prediction of future events and is reflective of the tendency of the powerful to take all things under their control. Bhupen Raghupati, the corrupt and depraved of the high official of the welfare state takes advice from Baba Mastram for every small or big thing. The novel shows the degeneration of man brought by the limitless hunger for power. The incident of puja room shows how the powerful person assaults the poor sexually and physically and roams around without any fear of punishment because they have political power as well as the power of money and the poor and mute masses are left for dying. The power of this scene lies that the politician and the bureaucrat who are there for the upliftment of the poor; they themselves self-aggrandizement at the cost of those whom they have been brought into existence.

One of the most talked of and burning issue is corruption which is rampant in contemporary society. It is everywhere from top to bottom; we are inhaling, digesting, supporting and even fighting against it. It is not that only the administrators and politicians are corrupt but corruption is there in middle class also; it seems that they have imitated the highly corrupt officials as their idols. Agastya Sen represents other aspect of it; his views about corruption are different; we come to know this when he discusses with Daya about the percentage of corrupt civil servants and says that he is dishonest as he uses office phone for personal reasons but he is not corrupt because he does not take bribe.

People like Rajni Suroor who is a theatre activist and friend of Prime Minister extracts lot of money from the government on the name of social service. The irony of the situation is that a drama named Vyatha is prepared by Rajni Suroor's group and it is going to present the real condition of the government offices but no one gets the ticket of the drama without greasing the palm of the peon. Even to get a No Objection Certificate to build a house, the rates of bribe are fixed; even a peon would take bribe from petitioner to allow him to meet the officer. Corruption in the field of education is also presented in the novel; a commissioner manages to get a Ph.D. degree with the help of his power and money because he persuaded the members of Jury panel of thesis by arranging for them trips to Singapore and Bangkok through his subordinates. It throws light on the poor quality of education rampant in welfare state where the degrees are sold and bought in the market. Government imposes taxes on the people to increase its revenue but the hard earned money of the people are not used for public welfare rather it is used for some other purposes like on the security of the ministers and renaming the ministries etc. There is no doubt that the welfare state has started many programmes like Rural Poor Self Employment, the Depressed Class Financial Independence Plan etc. but the thing is that these programmes are not implemented by the corrupt politicians and bureaucrats.

Caste is an important factor in Indian politics and politicians use their caste to win elections. The Chief Minister of Welfare State Bhanwvar Virbham uses his caste to reach the highest position in the politics and he helps Dr. Harihar Kapila because the latter belongs to his caste. In fact he is a murderer but he is elected with the help of his caste and money and Dr. Kapila also believes that caste is an important factor than merit. Caste card works even in admission and jobs where seats are reserved for certain candidates of a particular caste and if the deserving candidates of that specific caste are not available then the seat is given to an inefficient candidate of that caste rather a candidate who is deserving for that seat.

Thus we can say that Upamanyu Chatterjee has presented contemporary urban reality in his novel *The Mammeries of The Welfare State* with excellence and his focus is on presenting corruption in bureaucracy and political leaders, degradation in moral values, lack of healthy relationships, housing problem in urban society and caste politics etc. The novelist has given voice to the common people by indicating the utter indifference of the administrators and politician towards the welfare of the mute masses.

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