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**Exploring Postmodern Traits in Upamanyu Chatterjee's Select Novels: A
Critical Study**

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine the novels of Upamanyu Chatterjee from a postmodern standpoint. The fictional works of Upamanyu Chatterjee portray the voices of contemporary youth in contemporary society. The present paper provides a variety of views for critical analysis and dissent among the younger generation. Chatterjee is a prominent author of postmodern Indian literature. Nearly all of his works examine the reality of postmodern culture, such as the absence of household activities, economic instability, indifference, and the incapacity to adapt to contemporary life. As a representation of contemporary society, he uses postmodern storytelling methods to portray the culture, character, and behaviour of the younger generation. In the postmodern society, Chatterjee's protagonist lives only a meaningless hyperreal existence. His stories depict aficionados of urban education living a life of imagination and fantasy.

Key Terms: Post-modern, Post-modernism, Hyper-real, Fantasy, Self-centeredness

Introduction:

Postmodernism is a phrase used to describe a range of art, architecture, philosophy, and cultural movements that are considered to have arisen in response to and as a result of modernism. Postmodernism as a cohesive collection of ideas is often contested, since its application varies widely across fields and its implications vary widely. The word 'postmodernism' is often attributed to the period in literature and literary theory beginning in the 1960s, while others consider it to be the dominant intellectual trend since the conclusion of World War II in 1945. In the 1940s, the word 'postmodernism' was initially created to describe a backlash against the modernization of architecture. Later, it becomes a well-known phrase among art critics and literary theorists, and American cultural critics like as Susan Sontag and Leslie Fielder used it extensively in the context of literature throughout the 1960s. Numerous critics attempted to define from various perspectives, but they remain confusing. Soon, however, this perplexity will dissipate, and the next decade will see the emergence of fresh amazing shifts in every field of contemporary sciences and every creative form. *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction* by Nicol makes clear:



In the following decades the term began to figure in academic disciplines besides literary criticism and architecture – such as social theory, cultural and media studies, visual arts, philosophy, and history. Such wide-ranging usage meant that the term became overloaded with meaning, chiefly because it was being used describe characteristics of the social and political landscape as well as a whole range of different examples of cultural production. (1)

This extraordinary shift gets further advanced in the fields of social and cultural background, science, technology, and economics, among others. The development of science and technology changed the globe into a single civilization with a metropolitan consciousness that is homogeneous and cultural and social concerns that are comparable. This "new sensibility" finds its classical manifestations in current literary works, which are then categorized and dubbed 'Postmodern.'

Postmodernism is often seen as a backlash to modernism. It was the result of Protestantism and Capitalism, which promotes the concept of the human being as a distinct entity whose rights, psychology, and individuality are given priority. These influences shape an individual's connection with God and his propensity to make money. Postmodernism undermines this modernist worldview in order to reveal its dishonesty. It denies liberal humanism's theory, as well as its literature and culture, which allow each individual to express his unique thoughts on the universe in his own exclusive and valid manner. This time produced writing that is sarcastic and pessimistic about its own nature. It recognizes its inherent futility as a literary genre that departs from the classic norms of modernism. It highlights the futility of conventional approaches to make sense of the world out of reality.

In 1947, Arnold Toynbee used the word "postmodernism" to describe a contemporary western society in crisis. People were trying to make sense of a century marked by war and widespread atrocities, which led them to doubt conventional moral principles and beliefs. The phrase, however, underwent a significant transformation in the 1970s, coming to represent the expansion and growth of cultural modernism, the artistic and literary movement that had had a time of enormous impact between the wars and saw a resurgence of interest in 1960.



The characteristics of postmodern literature include metafiction, intertextuality, fabulation, etc. Metafiction is used to create a fiction within the art or to heighten the art's artificiality. In this storytelling approach of metafiction, irony and self-reflection are often used. Intertextuality is another significant characteristic that refers to works that are influenced by the meanings of other writings. Instead of creating new ideas, postmodern authors collect and transform the ideas of existing texts. Among the storytelling methods, black humor is prevalent. Postmodern art encourages reflexivity, self-conscious fragmentation, narrative discontinuity, and ambiguity. Literature simultaneously accentuates the destructured, degraded, and dehumanized subject. In the sense that the past and its worldview become the subject of satirical, frequently sarcastic play with historical figures, texts, and ideologies, it breaks completely with the past.

Post-modernism and Indian English Literature:

Postmodernism represents a final disillusionment with western culture pre conceptions and indulges in a merciless rethinking of history, pedagogy and aesthetics in literature. In the postmodern era Indian English fiction has a very luxuriant growth with many novels written by Indian English novelist. Bijay Kumar Das in his book *Postmodern Indian English Literature* comments that “postmodern and post-colonial fiction with a new exuberance of language resulting in the creation of an Indian English idiom, and its emphasis on history and myths of the land, and above all, sexual frankness” (93)

In the latter half of the 20th century, authors such as Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Shashi Deshpande, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Amit Choudhary, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, and Aravind Adiga ushered in a new age of Indian English literature. They experimented with novel concepts and methods.

Post-modernism Traits in Upamanyu Chatterjee's Novels:

The pointlessness of existence is brought home by Chatterjee, who also teaches us that no matter how much things change, they essentially stay the same. In his happy-ever-after fairy tale, someone does survive. Upamanyu Chatterjee's services and accomplishments have



been lauded by several critics. However, it is difficult to provide a precise evaluation of Chatterjee's writings from a postmodern perspective. In the post-colonial society that Chatterjee describes, estrangement and exile appear to be actions that people must do regardless of their circumstances.

Alienation and Self-centeredness:

The protagonist of *English, August* and *The Mammaries of Welfare State* suffers from an inescapable sense of alienation and this feeling of exile is produced in him by an intense awareness of his colonial legacy. Agastya Sen is distracted with alienation because of his displacement and dislocation in Madna. He is unable to hold communion in the society he lives.

Upamanyu Chatterjee pictures the problems of Agastya Sen's alienation by making him an alienated hero. Therefore, it is planned to explore and explicate Agastya's psychograph in order to identify the causes of his sense of alienation.

The book *English, August* is written in a seriocomic style, and absurdity and dislocation are the sources of situational humour. The absurd is mixed with the emotions of the character in the book by Upamanyu Chatterjee. In his portrayal of modern India, he is brutal while still being loving. The increasing dominance of Western culture troubles Agastya and his companions as well as draws them to it. However, while he performs his duties as a trainee at Madna, Agastya starts to develop a sense of what is significant and interesting to him. There are no certainties or absolutes, but there may be a developing understanding of the necessity for one to be oneself, for one to be anchored, and ultimately for one to be happy. Agastya indulges in sexual fantasies, music, literature, alcohol, marijuana, and masturbation as a trainee at Madna.

Agastya makes fun of everyone and everything in his vicinity. His westernized influences often annoy his superiors, subordinates, and co-workers, who display animosity against his job. He disregards the law and transgresses societal norms by making offensive remarks about pornography. He sometimes feels angry, reflective, and melancholy. In Madna,



he feels a feeling of unreality and homelessness. In a pensive mood, Agastya asks himself, “I don’t look like a bureaucrat, what am I doing here. I should have been a photographer, or a makes of ad films, something like that, shallow and urban” (13). He considers himself alien living in a misfit world, and does not enjoy the role he has earned for himself by virtue of his competitive qualification.

In *The Mammaries of the Welfare State*, Agastya is deputy secretary in the secretariat control room in Bombay, having been transferred from the post of joint commissioner of rehabilitation in Delhi. Later, he becomes the collector of Madna, as if to remind that this book is a sequel of *English, August*. *The Mammaries of the Welfare State* is primarily concerned with the financial and sexual shenanigans going on among the Indian elite, who have privileged positions yet abuse the law with impunity. Characters and locales from the prior book reappeared. The self-serving politicians and avaricious bureaucrats who profit from the welfare state are subjected to special criticism in the book. The book *The Mammaries of the Welfare State* depicts Agastya Sen's prior life in exactly the same way as before. However, this time the plot is primarily concerned with the political and administrative realm. There is very little storyline and very little subject; the plot isn't really original.

Disintegrated Family Ties:

Chatterjee’s second novel *The Last Burden* is a saga of emotional bondage among the various members of a family. As a result of the generational divide between parents and their children leading separate lifestyles, it portrays a realistic image of an Indian middle-class family in the twentieth century as well as the conflicts and resentment that exist inside a lowermiddle-class Bengali Brahmin family. This book is about generational conflict, especially as a traditional Brahmin family is strained by such changes as children leaving home to work in other cities, the desire for nuclear families, the intermarriage of Brahmins and Christians, the high status of travel abroad, and of imported objects and tastes. Situations like these are observed in the traditional family. The intricate ties that exist in the small joint family are examined in this novel.



The family consists of two retired government employees, Shyamanand, who is both physically and emotionally paralyzed, his wife Urmila, the archetype of an average Indian woman, and their two sons Burfi and Jamun, as well as Burfi's Christian wife Joyce and their two sons, Pista and Doom, ages ten and four, respectively. When the narrative begins, Jamun is reading the biography of Mahatma Gandhi by Robert Payne, in which Gandhi asserts that responsibility to the world is more essential than loyalty to family. Jamun, who lives in a remote town, is the novel's primary character and its protagonist.

With the exception of Jamun, the youngest son, the family everyone shares a home. After Shyamanand and Urmila retired, the home was erected. Jamun is single and resides in Maharashtra. He works with Kasturi, a female friend of Jamun's who later gets married and becomes pregnant with another man called Agastya. Kasthuri and Jamun talk about physical sex in its most fundamental form. Jamun is informed by Kasthuri that marriage to her meant nothing more than sex. Why don't you get married, Jamun? she asks. Ask your parents to choose a Mrs. for you since you've been so considerate of them and their feelings, so you won't have to wait till they pass away before you can, as my husband says, "get your sex on tap" (LB 146). The family aya, a Marathi guy named Satyavan Hegiste, Kuki Jamun's maid Kashi Bai, her son Vaman, Shyamanand's niece Chhana, Urmila's cardiologist Haldia, and the family are additional characters.

Jamun, the novel's protagonist, is never noisy at home or at work. He exclusively communicates with Hegiste, his buddy and co-worker. He is in a physically organized and tidy city, but it is socially and spiritually lifeless. His tale starts with the modernist longing for the city, the desire to live openly with the shattered and unreconciled nature of his life, and the need to get strength from his inner battles, wherever they may ultimately take him. It tells the tale of how he came to learn how to create a halo around his personal space and himself, how he gradually lost these haloes while searching for a new identity, and how he came to understand that his story was an eternally repeated one that had already been lived by his mother, father, and possibly himself. The whole book is centred on how ideals and beloved relationships may suddenly get warped and become a burden for one another.



The novel *Way to Go* is a sequel to the second novel *The Last Burden*. Shyamanand, after the death of his wife Urmila is compelled to stay either with his son Jamun or Burfi. Since Burfi has to move to Noida on transfer and since Shyamanand has difference of opinion towards Joyce, Shyamanand decides to stay in his own house with Jamun. Jamun has to endure all the mannerisms of his father for many years. He and his father are also accompanied by Kasibai (cook) and her son Vaman, who take care of the family. But very soon Shyamanand begins to realize himself as an outsider in his own house. And the feeling of loneliness and desperate condition of the family makes him reflect. Shyamanand's only companion Dr.

Mukerjee's sudden death affects him a lot. Shyamanand is well aware of this darker side of his son's life and tries his best ways to put an obstacle to it. He does this by opting the choice of second bed room so that he can take care of preventing such things. So, he cannot prolong over this over a long time. But in contrary to this, his son in one instant has made a direct statement to get married settle down in life. In Sanjiv Kumar's article "Excruciating Portrayal of Humanity in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *Way to Go*" states

...the postmodern Indian English Literature which generally foregrounds the scintillating picture of modern humanity, identifies itself with glitterature, twitterature or chick-lit. However, the rich heritage of Indian novel in English is somehow kept alive by the new generation of novelists like Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Chetan Bhagat, Aravind Adiga and Upamanyu Chatterjee.... Upamanyu Chatterjee's *Way to Go* as a novel portraying disorientated Indian society where individuals follow the contemporary idiom of growth and ignore the sanctity of social institutions like family and marriage. (144)

Jamun, the protagonist of the novel, is preoccupied with the search for his lost father whom he misses a lot—sometimes out of love and at other times, out of sense of duty of a son towards a father. Though his stay with his father had never been pleasant, he comes to realize as to how his father's presence engaged and absorbed him. On being left alone in his father's house, he reminisces the moments when "they had all (his entire family) lived together under



one roof as one large, unhappy family...on Jamun's return to the city of his mother's death—for that is how he had come to think of it, forever polluted." (29)

Jamun is introduced by the author as an example of a lower middle class figure from the wasteland who is obsessed with upward mobility, eroding conventional values, and weakening social structures like marriage and family. The setting of the narrative is defined by the growing urbanization and its associated squalor, filth, traffic, and unhealthy living conditions. Sunil Khilnani's essential work highlights the negative effects of widespread migration of people into cities for career possibilities or for their children's better education. Khilnani remark:

India's cities are hinges between its vast population spread across the countryside and the hectic tides of the global economy, with its ruthlessly shifting tastes and its ceaseless murmur of the pleasures and hazards of modernity. How this threecornered relationship develops over the next decades will decisively mould India's future economic, cultural and political possibilities. (49).

All of Shyamanand's wealth went into building a home he could call his own, a home he both adored and despised. He was quite proud of the home he had constructed using just scraps of his own land, but he also saw the insanity of spending his life money on a home in a neighborhood that had turned into a type of concentration camp. He enjoyed having a "son of his own blood" around, and the barbed wire fence and cementing of the gate gave him a sense of security. He saw these as exceptional achievements that few of his contemporaries could claim. It was described as "his family made concrete" and "a dream accomplished and a vision of the family idealized and then made real brick by brick." The home was the "grandest tangible vestiges of his family." (201). Chatterjee's investigation and excavation of Indian society's cracks deepen as the book progresses. Jamun and Burfi live in a very small world filled with boredom, hopelessness, violence, and stunning dysfunction.

In *The Last Burden* and *Way to Go*, Chatterjee vividly describes it, though the family creates barriers for Jamun and his brother Burfi, they give support to their parents in some conflicting situation. Indian culture is represented in the novels of Chatterjee.



Cultural Degradation:

Chatterjee's *Weight Loss* tracks Bhola's obsessions and is about obsession. Bhola, who is ruled by his lust, has built his whole existence around his fixation with Mrs. Manchanda, his landlady, vegetable dealer Titli, and her husband Moti. Bhola follows the road of "sexual and spiritual degradation," which the book's name underlines, by pursuing Titli and her husband for practically the whole of his life, which he actually ends by slitting his wrists at the age of 37.

Bhola, the main character, is a Bengali Brahmin by caste. He comes from the upper middle class. His shapeless form has caused his classmates, instructors, and particularly the stern sports teacher Anthony to refer to him as "womanish," which is why he dislikes his weight. The first chapter of the book describes Bhola's initial preoccupation with Anthony, his physical education instructor. He is equally drawn to and repulsed by many people around him, despite the fact that other pupils have progressed to rule with their female professors. Nearly all of his sexual interactions that come to him include his chef, the eunuchs, or a sadhu who is staring at him. Many people will be persuaded by the book's school part to believe that it is a hilarious novel that demonstrates the protagonist's growth and maturity as he overcomes his Jesuit education and Hindu culture. However, neither the protagonist nor the book make any further travels. Despite being so dark, this book is hilarious and very genuine, even in its seemingly fantastical universe where the protagonist's sexual needs drive all of his actions.

The narrative begins when he is eleven years old and moves on to the challenging period of puberty. He solely shares everything with Dosto; he doesn't have any other buddies. To lose weight and tone up, Bhola constantly attempts to jog. Despite being fairly wealthy, his parents are too preoccupied with their own successful lives to give a damn about their son's emotional needs. Their chef, Gopinath, sometimes watches after Bhola while they are in bed. The father of Bhola has a terrible attitude about the underprivileged neighbours.

The main character, Bhola, is a representation of the post-modern youth, full of promise but soulless and aimless in personal life, like earlier works by Chatterjee. From the



ages of eleven to thirty-seven, which are the prime and golden years of any educated person's life, the book tells the story of twenty-six significant years of his life. While adolescence is still present, transitional puberty is just around the corner. However, because Bhola has a higher I.Q., it has already entered his mind. When he is seven years old, Gopinath, the cook, with whom he must share a bed because his parents and brother are away, allows him to see the forbidden organs out of curiosity. He also notices that Gopinath is wearing a ring in his genitalia as a sign of sect affiliation. Physically drawn to his instructors Anthony and Jeremiah, he experiences carnal pleasure from admiring their form. In class, she generally sat in a voluptuous slouch in her chair alongside her table, her ankles crossed, legs spread wide, patches of sweat on her breast of a paunch, arms linked overhead to display armpits that were vast and grey wastelands of talcum and stubble... her thighs twitched open and shut, open and shut, like an eye blinking, mesmerising the entire front row.... (WL 14)

The reason for Bhola's unusual sex urges was understandable given the circumstances of his upbringing. One's attitude and behaviour are greatly influenced and shaped by the culture. Even his brother and his Christian stepmother don't have the time or inclination to see what he is doing. No one has ever bothered to care for the appropriate development of his intellect or his likes. A tree stoops and develops in that direction from where it receives what it requires without realizing or caring about the unsightly deformity that is occurring in it, which causes it to become de-shaped when it does not get the necessary ingredients. Individual differences will always exist when it comes to the subject of people.

Conclusion:

The books of Upamanyu Chatterjee bring back to life The Waste Land's lifeless imagery. The portrayal of a post-modern wasteland devoid of human worth is also seen here. The protagonists' loss of identity, humanity, and traditional and cultural ethics resulted in a significant loss of potential and a crisis awareness. In Chatterjee's presentation of his works, the dreadful society of today is shown with a dash of ominous humor to cover up the revolting portrayal of his heroes as rootless, self-centered outcasts. It is abundantly evident from his characters that the current generation will emphasize outward pleasure above the



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significance of pain in their lives. They search far and wide to enquire into the elements of bodily pleasure rather than discovering the everlasting qualities of life. His books' most important sections highlight how old values have been destroyed and are now fighting for survival in the modern world. Living in the now without considering culture, society, or the future is the worst kind of human death in the contemporary world. The events in Chatterjee's works serve as a reminder of the impending catastrophe.



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