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Escaping the Real: Psychedelics and Postcolonial Alienation in Upamanyu Chatterjee's English, August

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the complex interplay between postcolonial identity, environmental dislocation, and capitalist realism in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August: An Indian Story* through the lens of Agastya Sen's psychological struggles and his turn to psychedelics as a form of escapism. By engaging with the theories of Timothy Morton, Mark Fisher, and Sara Ahmed, the analysis delves into how Agastya's drug use symbolizes a deeper critique of his alienation from both the physical and cultural environment of rural India. The paper argues that Agastya's reliance on marijuana reflects the broader existential challenges of navigating a postcolonial identity in a world where meaningful alternatives to the status quo seem unattainable. Ultimately, the paper posits that Agastya's escapism, while offering temporary relief, exacerbates his dislocation, trapping him in a cycle of disengagement that underscores the futility of passive resistance in the face of systemic alienation.

KEYWORDS: Postcolonial Identity, Environmental Dislocation, Capitalist Realism, Escapism, Psychedelics, Dark Ecology, Alienation, Affect Theory, Upamanyu Chatterjee, English, August

I. INTRODUCTION

Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August: An Indian Story* delves into the existential and cultural turmoil of Agastya Sen, a Western-educated young man struggling with his placement in the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) in the rural town of Madna. As Agastya grapples with the cultural dissonance and alienation that arises from his education and upbringing, he increasingly turns to marijuana and other forms of escapism. This paper argues that Agastya's drug use and withdrawal into escapism reflect a deeper critique of postcolonial identity, environmental dislocation, and the pervasive influence of capitalist realism on individual subjectivity. By integrating the theories of Timothy Morton, Mark Fisher, and Sara Ahmed, the paper explores how Agastya's retreat into psychedelics represents both a rejection of and a complicity in the conditions of his existential and cultural malaise.

II. PSYCHEDELICS AND DARK ECOLOGY

Timothy Morton's concept of dark ecology, as presented in *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*, offers a valuable framework for analyzing Agastya's drug use as a response to his deep sense of dislocation. Dark ecology challenges the idealized view of nature as a pure, separate realm and instead highlights the entangled, often discomfiting relationship between humans and the ecological world. Morton argues that the ecological crisis is an ongoing process, not a distant event, and that it permeates every aspect of existence, often manifesting as a kind of ecological melancholia.

Agastya's alienation in Madna is compounded by his awareness of the stark contrast between the urban life he is accustomed to and the rural environment in which he finds himself. His marijuana use can be interpreted as a coping mechanism for dealing with the unsettling realities of his new environment, which Morton might describe as an expression of ecological melancholia. In one instance, Agastya reflects on his surroundings with a sense of profound discomfort: "The sun was a ferocious ball, glaring down at the wilderness around me. I was sticky with sweat and grime... all I wanted was to escape into a world that made sense" (Chatterjee 34). This visceral reaction to the natural world around him reflects the discomfort and disorientation that characterize his experience of dark ecology.

Morton's theory of dark ecology also illuminates the paradoxical nature of Agastya's escapism. While his use of marijuana provides temporary relief from the harsh realities of life in Madna, it also deepens his sense of dislocation by further alienating him from the world. Morton argues that recognizing our entanglement with ecological systems should ideally lead to a deeper engagement with the world, rather than a retreat from it. However, Agastya's reliance on



marijuana represents a failure to engage with the dark ecological realities of his situation, choosing instead to numb himself to the discomforts that are inherent to human existence within the Anthropocene.

This ambivalence is evident when Agastya muses, “It was all so pointless, this IAS job, this village, this life. Why couldn’t I just drift away, float above it all, like the smoke from my joint?” (Chatterjee 56). His desire to “drift away” reflects not just a personal escapism but a deeper rejection of the entangled, often unsettling reality that dark ecology presents. The use of psychedelics, then, becomes a way for Agastya to momentarily disconnect from the overwhelming realities of his environment, even as it reinforces his sense of alienation.

III. CAPITALIST REALISM AND ESCAPISM

Mark Fisher’s concept of capitalist realism, as articulated in his book *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, offers another lens through which to examine Agastya’s escapism. Fisher describes capitalist realism as the pervasive belief that capitalism is the only viable economic and political system, rendering any alternative unimaginable. This ideology not only governs economic structures but also shapes cultural perceptions and individual identities, leading to a sense of resignation and inertia.

Agastya’s sense of futility and his turn to marijuana can be seen as a response to the oppressive weight of capitalist realism. Despite his education and the opportunities that come with his position, Agastya feels trapped in a system that offers little in the way of genuine fulfillment or purpose. His drug use, then, can be understood as a form of passive resistance—a way of opting out of the bureaucratic demands and expectations imposed by his role in the IAS.

The novel captures this sense of hopelessness in Agastya’s introspective moments: “Every day felt like the last, an endless loop of meaningless tasks and hollow interactions. It was as if time itself had stalled in this place, and all I could do was smoke and wait for it to end” (Chatterjee 113). This reflection mirrors Fisher’s observation that under capitalist realism, the future is foreclosed, leaving individuals with a sense of resignation and an inability to envision meaningful change. Agastya’s use of psychedelics, then, is not merely a personal escape but a symptom of the broader ideological conditions that render resistance to the status quo both difficult and seemingly pointless.

Fisher’s critique of capitalist realism suggests that Agastya’s drug use is emblematic of a broader cultural malaise, where the lack of alternatives leads to a form of nihilistic escapism. In this context, Agastya’s marijuana use becomes a coping mechanism that allows him to endure the stifling monotony of his life in Madna, even as it reinforces the very conditions he seeks to escape. His musings, “What’s the point of any of this? We’re all just cogs in a machine that doesn’t care if we break down” (Chatterjee 162), encapsulating the despair and disillusionment that characterize his experience of capitalist realism.

IV. AFFECT THEORY AND THE EMOTIONAL LANDSCAPE OF ESCAPISM

Sara Ahmed’s work on affect theory, particularly in *The Promise of Happiness*, provides insights into the emotional dimensions of Agastya’s escapism. Ahmed explores how emotions are shaped by cultural and social contexts and how they, in turn, influence our interactions with the world. In particular, she examines how certain emotions, such as happiness or melancholy, are culturally coded and how they impact our behavior and perceptions.

Agastya’s emotional landscape is dominated by a sense of ennui and melancholy, which drives him toward escapism as a means of managing these difficult emotions. Ahmed’s concept of “unhappiness as a form of resistance” is particularly relevant to understanding Agastya’s behavior. His refusal to conform to the expectations of his role in the IAS and his retreat into drug use can be seen as a form of affective resistance—a rejection of the normative expectations of happiness and success that are imposed on him.

This is evident in Agastya’s interactions with his colleagues and superiors, where his disinterest and disengagement are often met with confusion or disapproval. When a senior officer questions his lack of ambition, Agastya responds with a dismissive shrug, saying, “Why should I care about this job, about any of this? It’s all so meaningless” (Chatterjee 140). This rejection of the prescribed path of success reflects Ahmed’s idea that unhappiness can be a way of resisting the pressures to conform to societal norms that feel inauthentic or oppressive.

Ahmed’s affect theory also sheds light on the ambivalence in Agastya’s relationship with his environment. On one hand, his drug use allows him to momentarily escape the oppressive atmosphere of Madna; on the other hand, it reinforces his sense of dislocation and alienation. This tension is captured in a moment of introspection: “Was this



really the life I was meant to lead? Endless days of suffocating heat, mindless paperwork, and the occasional joint to numb it all?" (Chatterjee 188). Agastya's melancholia is not simply a personal failing but a reflection of the affective conditions imposed by his social and cultural context.

Through Ahmed's lens, Agastya's retreat into drugs becomes a way of negotiating the demands of an environment that feels both alien and hostile. His melancholia and escapism are not merely symptoms of personal discontent but forms of affective resistance to a life that feels disconnected from his true desires. In this sense, Agastya's drug use is a response to the emotional and psychological pressures of navigating a postcolonial identity in a world shaped by capitalist realism and ecological dislocation.

V. POSTCOLONIAL ALIENATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL DISLOCATION

Agastya's drug use can be seen as a response to this sense of environmental and cultural dislocation. By retreating into psychedelics, he attempts to create a mental space where he can reconcile the conflicting aspects of his identity and escape the immediate discomforts of his surroundings. In one poignant scene, after smoking a joint, Agastya contemplates his fragmented sense of self:

"I closed my eyes and let the smoke fill my lungs, hoping it would blur the edges of this reality. In that haze, I could almost imagine myself back in Delhi, among friends who spoke my language, shared my jokes. But the illusion was fleeting, and the weight of Madna pressed down harder once the high wore off" (Chatterjee 95).

This passage underscores the temporary and illusory nature of Agastya's escape, highlighting how his attempts to find solace through drugs ultimately fail to bridge the gap between his Westernized identity and the realities of rural India. Furthermore, Agastya's interactions with the local populace reveal his deep-seated sense of otherness. When conversing with a local officer, he remarks:

"It's strange, isn't it? I'm supposed to serve this place, but I barely understand it. Sometimes I feel like an alien dropped into a world that operates on codes I'll never decipher" (Chatterjee 102).

This admission reflects the profound disconnect he feels, not just environmentally but also culturally and socially. His use of the term "alien" conveys a sense of complete estrangement, aligning with postcolonial theories that discuss the disorienting effects of cultural hybridity and the lingering impacts of colonialism on identity formation.

Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "third space," we can interpret Agastya's experiences as navigating an in-between space where traditional binaries of colonizer and colonized, modern and traditional, urban and rural are disrupted. Bhabha posits that this hybrid space is fraught with ambiguity but also holds the potential for new forms of identity and resistance (Bhabha 56). However, Agastya seems unable to harness this potential, instead succumbing to a sense of paralysis and withdrawal, as evidenced by his repeated escapism through marijuana.

VI. INTEGRATION OF THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The interplay between Morton's dark ecology, Fisher's capitalist realism, and Ahmed's affect theory becomes evident when examining the cumulative effects of Agastya's experiences and coping mechanisms. Each framework sheds light on different facets of his alienation and attempts at escape, illustrating how environmental, ideological, and emotional factors intertwine to shape his subjectivity.

For instance, Morton's dark ecology helps us understand Agastya's discomfort with the natural environment of Madna and his failure to find harmony within it. Agastya's frequent retreats into drug-induced states can be seen as attempts to create an artificial sense of separation from an environment that he perceives as hostile and oppressive. This is exemplified when he reflects:

"The trees here seemed to close in on me, their shadows long and menacing. In my high, they transformed into grotesque figures, mocking my presence, reminding me that I didn't belong. Nature here wasn't serene; it was suffocating" (Chatterjee 128).

This passage illustrates how Agastya's perception of nature is filtered through his psychological state and cultural background, reinforcing his sense of alienation and discomfort.



Fisher's concept of capitalist realism further elucidates Agastya's sense of entrapment within bureaucratic structures that seem immutable and indifferent. The monotonous and purposeless nature of his work contributes to his disillusionment and desire to escape. In a moment of frustration, Agastya confides to a friend:

"Day after day, it's the same endless paperwork, the same hollow procedures. Is this what governance is supposed to be? Sometimes I think the system is designed to crush any spark of initiative or creativity. What's left to do but light up and forget about it all for a while?" (Chatterjee 150).

Here, Agastya's critique of the bureaucratic system aligns with Fisher's argument that capitalist structures perpetuate a sense of inevitability and hopelessness, leading individuals to seek solace in passive forms of resistance or escape.

Ahmed's affect theory brings attention to the emotional dimensions of Agastya's experiences, highlighting how his feelings of unhappiness and melancholy function as forms of resistance against the expectations imposed upon him. Agastya's emotional responses are not merely personal but are shaped by and reflective of broader social and cultural pressures. During a candid moment of self-reflection, he ponders:

"Everyone expects me to be grateful for this prestigious job, to serve diligently and find fulfillment in it. But what if I don't want what they think I should want? What if their version of happiness suffocates me?" (Chatterjee 175).

This internal dialogue underscores how Agastya's emotions serve as a means of questioning and resisting prescribed notions of success and happiness, aligning with Ahmed's assertion that emotions are integral to the politics of resistance and identity.

VII. CONCLUSION

Agastya Sen's journey in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August* presents a complex interplay of personal and cultural struggle, encapsulating themes of postcolonial identity, environmental dislocation, and ideological confinement. Through his persistent use of marijuana and other forms of escapism, Agastya seeks refuge from the multifaceted alienation he experiences, yet these attempts often serve to deepen his sense of isolation.

By applying Timothy Morton's concept of dark ecology, we gain insight into Agastya's fraught relationship with the natural environment of Madna and his inability to reconcile with the ecological realities that surround him. Mark Fisher's notion of capitalist realism illuminates the oppressive and stifling nature of the bureaucratic structures that entrap Agastya, rendering meaningful change or escape seemingly impossible. Sara Ahmed's affect theory allows us to understand the emotional undercurrents of Agastya's resistance, framing his melancholia and discontent as valid responses to the societal and cultural expectations that conflict with his sense of self.

The dialogues and introspections from the novel vividly illustrate Agastya's internal and external conflicts, bringing to life the theoretical discussions and grounding them in the lived experience of the character. His struggles reflect broader questions about identity, belonging, and the search for meaning in a world shaped by complex historical, cultural, and environmental forces.

Ultimately, *English, August* offers a profound commentary on the challenges of navigating personal and cultural identity in contemporary postcolonial society. Agastya's story underscores the difficulties of finding one's place amidst conflicting influences and expectations, and the often inadequate means by which individuals attempt to cope with these pressures. The novel invites readers to contemplate the intricate interplay between self, society, and environment, and the ways in which escapism can both reveal and obscure deeper truths about our condition.

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