

FILM IN CULTURAL SPACE: A STUDY OF ENGLISH, AUGUST

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In 1995 a particularly curious film was released in Calcutta, which appeared not to be able to retain its entire audience till the end of the show. It is even more curious to note that the section of the audience which decided to see the sky before the movie ended, were invariably constituted of middle aged men and women and family groups. Watching them coming out of the hall one could almost wonder whether the film was certified as— ‘strictly for urban youth’. The film I am referring to is *English, August*¹ directed by Dev Benegal, adapted from Upamanyu Chatterjee’s novel, *English, August : An Indian Story*². The story traces a year in the life of Agastya Sen, a young I. A. S. officer having urban roots, who ultimately finds himself to be a ‘misfit’ in the rural setting of a South Indian town called Madna and decides to leave his job.

I believe that the ambiguous reception of the film cannot be explained away by simply pointing to the ‘modern attitude’ of the protagonist. In fact, the very notion of ‘modernity’ that is constructed by the film demands an analysis. I am more inclined to maintain that Agastya Sen is not merely a typical, symbolic representation of the contemporary young generation, but rather a carefully constructed subject who represents and addresses a certain specific section of the middle or upper middle class urban youth in India.

It is worthwhile to notice that the narration of the film *English, August* is episodic in nature. By this I mean to say that Agastya’s experience as a civil servant is narrated in terms of several episodes within each of which he encounters different elements that constitute his life in Madna. Thus the film shows us Agastya meeting the collector, Agastya drinking with his neighbour Shankar, chatting with the journalist Sathe, or the forest officer Mandy, meeting the tribal people in the village and even Agastya encountering the frog. Although the film portrays rural space quite realistically, the

narrative does not follow a strictly logical cause-effect progression, that is conventionally expected from a realist text. It is also noteworthy that the narration is centred upon Agastya's point of view. The gaze which is cast upon the rural setting of Madna is distinctively urban. Therefore it is not surprising that the representation of the town should comply with the popular imagination of the modern but naive city-dweller. Thus, along with the beautiful rural landscapes, the film presents us images of character-types such as the cook with his host of children or the clerk who does not wash his hands after urination and of course all of them speak incorrect English with a peculiar South Indian accent. We can see images of human excrement, unlit and dirty offices cramped with files, small-time saloon which entertains you with loud South Indian film songs, and sweating hands and faces which make the scorching heat almost palpable. This mosquito-infested, drab, unexciting town leaves no doubts in the viewer's mind as to 'who is looking' at it. Not only does Agastya's gaze permeate the diegetic space but the audience is also kept at his epistemic level. A hierarchy of knowledge might operate between the protagonist and other characters, but the viewer always remain at Agastya's level of knowledge. In fact, the film does not merely 'look' at Agastya's world but rather tries to look at the world through Agastya's eyes. In the novel Upamanyu Chatterjee attempts to construct such a perspective by frequently punctuating speeches, actions of other characters with Agastya's thoughts or comments which are sometimes incorporated within actual brackets. The film creates a similar effect by cutting away to Agastya's thoughts or point of view in the middle of an action or a dialogue. For example, in the dinner sequence at the Collector's house there are several such shots of Agastya recollecting or imagining his own family members' reaction towards his education and cultural habits. When the guests raise the issue of his father's marriage, there is a cut to Agastya's viewpoint where he imagines his aunts' caustic reaction to the inter—caste marriage of his parents. Even when Mrs. Srivastava (the Collector's wife) talks to Agastya, the audience is offered Agastya's sexual fantasies in bold animation while Lou Reed's 'Walk on the Wild Side' plays on the soundtrack. Dev Benegal actually employs an excessive amount of point of view and subjective shots which mimic the bracketing device of the novel. Such experimentation at a formal or structural level had perhaps proved to be a little disorienting for a *Cin Ed* journalist, who had described the film as

‘not well-knitted’³. His idea of ‘good knitting’ most probably refers to a linear, sequential flow of the narrative from shot to shot or sequence to sequence. Incidentally, the kind of realism that he misses so much is dependent on causal connections between events or episodes which in turn demand psychologically motivated characters. In the case of English, August the ‘knitting’ required can only be done by the audience through identification with Agastya at some level. This individual who is familiar with the ‘subject’ whom Agastya represents, and can share his gaze, is the ‘addressee’ or ‘spectator’ that the film posits. The social identity of this ‘spectator’ can be traced if one studies the traits which make up Agastya’s character and follow the numerous clues which Dev Benegal offers at a formal level through *mis-en-scene* and sound-track.

One of the most prominent aspects of Agastya’s character is his lack of motivation. On asking—‘What does Agastya want?’, one simply fails to come up with a proper answer. Instead, one stumbles over the absurd realization that Agastya desires to smoke a lot of Marijuana, drink alcohol, listen to ‘good’ music, read the English translation of the Bhagavad Gita, and of course he wants to be happy in some obscure, enigmatic sense. The protagonist's quasi-philosophical passivity, rootlessness, anxiety, and ‘institutionally incorrect’ attitude does explain the disorienting narrative structure but at the same time, raises another profound issue. Why do we have to see the world through the psyche of an absurd post-colonial product? It is interesting to note that for the first time in the history of Indian Cinema such an individual has come to occupy a central position in a narrative. For the first time he has been granted considerable amount of autonomy and linguistic agency. This marijuana-addict is not the misdirected, weak brother of the hero or heroine, neither a henchman of the villain. His attitude does not have to be justified by elaborate flashbacks and we do not have to undergo the pain of engaging in discourses over his moral position. The major shift, so far as the representation of ‘a-social’ types or drug addicts in Indian Popular Cinema is concerned, might have interesting significances. Considering the references to marijuana, and nature of the shots where Agastya is seen rolling or smoking joints, one might argue that marijuana is represented as a cultural accessory rather than an illegal drug. Even his a-social nature, irresponsible attitude, has been carefully crafted so as to produce comic

effects. An attempt has been made to describe Agastya—not only as a ‘Misfit’ in a traditional Indian society who is unable to enter mature human relations but also as an individual belonging to a different kind of community, albeit adolescent in origin or nature. In fact, a certain amount of meaning is invested into the marijuana Agastya smokes. It is not the ‘ganja’ which a hermit smokes as a religious or spiritual custom, nor is it the morally degrading ‘drugs’ which lands you in jail or hospital. This marijuana connotes the aura of the Beatnik generation, the drug culture of the sixties. Across the years ‘flower culture’ has had a considerable amount of influence on Indian youth - more influence than any other counter cultural trend has ever had. Evidences of such connotations and references lie scattered in the film text in a number of sequences. The representation of Agastya’s room—a symbolic rendition of his private space, is particularly significant. The room is always lit up through red, blue or purple filters, thereby producing a highly psychedelic atmosphere in which Agastya spends most of his time smoking, masturbating, and reading Gita with blazing guitars as musical accompaniment. The reference becomes more obvious by the way in which Agastya’s musical preferences undergo a radical transformation from the novel to the film. In the film Agastya does not listen to Rabindra Sangeet, Nazrulgeeti, nor to Scott Joplin or Keith Jarett. In a shot when Agastya smoking as usual, approaches his cassette-rack to put on some music, the camera closes in on the rack. The names, that are clearly identifiable, happen to be ‘Traffic’ and ‘Pink Floyd’, both of which are psychedelic rock bands from the sixties. The only fond recollections that he seems to have of his past days are of the long, intoxicated midnight trips with his friends in Delhi. As Agastya jogs down Madna, after midnight, haunted by his psychedelic memories, a dissolve on the screen shows an intoxicated Agastya with his friends Dhruvo and Neera rushing past in a car as the soundtrack plays ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ by the rock group ‘Queen’. The same kind of sequence in the novel refers to jazz music by Scott Joplin being played in the car. The music and sound-track of the film perform a parallel narration that serves to concretize the images with specific meanings and thereby locating an individual within a certain cultural condition. A sequence, again in Agastya’s room, contains a close-up of his face while he utters the following words-

Mother do you think they'll drop the bomb?

Agastya actually quotes the opening line of a Pink Floyd song called 'Mother'. It is evident that the image becomes meaningless without a partial sharing and investment of meaning from the audience. But for the 'spectator' of the film this same image is transparent because they are likely to know the song by heart. Quoting the first paragraph of the song will make it clear how the sound image depicts Agastya's socio-cultural position and reveals an implicit thematic tension. The song goes:

Mother do you think they'll drop the bomb
Mother do you think they'll like this song
Mother do you think they'll try to break my balls
Mother should I build a wall.
Mother should I run for President

Mother should I trust the Government
Mother will they put me in the firing line.⁴

(Written by Roger Waters)

Thus at one level, Agastya seems to be aware of his existential anxiety, he seems to be conscious of his freedom to accept or reject, to conform or to rebel. The fear of authority represented in the song/ poem, does bring into focus the entire tension and conflict between institution and counter-culture. Now our 'spectator' suddenly seems uncannily familiar. He might be found at almost any urban college in sociology, history or literature departments. He is likely to be a typically disoriented character who is equally interested in Zen Buddhism, Progressive Jazz, underground Art, existentialist Philosophy or postmodern architecture. These are the 'beautiful people' who would enjoy smoking 'hashish' after their morning tea and wish they could afford L. S. D. You are more likely to find them at jazz concerts, art galleries or film festivals rather than at trendy clubs or discotheques. These are precisely the ones who frequent avant-garde music or video stores searching for bootlegged recordings of their preferred bands like

‘Grateful Dead’ or ‘King Crimson’. Their private collection of books is bound to contain some weird names unheard of by mainstream clientele. Like Agastya Sen, books and music for them is not mere entertainment but fundamental necessity, a spiritual requisite for existence.

It is needless to point out that such cultural groups are a potential threat to consumerism. Agastya Sen can hardly be described as a perfect consumer in a late capitalist society. As Shankar points out to Agastya in the novel, - ‘We are men without ambition and all we want is to be left alone in peace, so that we can try and be happy. So few people will understand this simplicity.’ Not to have an ambition is perhaps the original sin in a consumer society. The individual must want to become a successful entity, he must desire material comforts, recognition, and work towards the formation of the most fundamental unit, the family. These drives demand goal oriented behaviour. Capitalism cannot properly operate with too many Agastyas as subjects, and thus they must remain a minority if they have to exist at all. But rejection might not be the only way for the market to deal with counter-culture. Any counter-culture can exist so far as the mainstream culture posits it as the Other. Thus it is likely to weaken or dissolve as soon as it is internalized by the market. Hence mainstream culture seems to have an alternative, it might operate by inclusion of the alien subjects, rather than exclusion of the same. The most obvious and effective mode of inclusion would be by directly addressing the subjects, which the film *English, August* incidentally does. But it is much more interesting to notice that by the time the film had been released in Calcutta, there were some other products addressing a counter—cultural audience, thereby creating the space for Agastya to emerge. In 1994 within a short period of time some unlikely cassettes appeared in the music stores of Calcutta. Amidst numerous ‘Bon Jovi’, ‘Guns N Roses’, one could now find the previously unreleased ‘Grateful Dead’ compilation ‘Skeletons From the Closet’ (1974) gloriously shining with images of skeletons and roses—the famous Dead icon. It was followed by ‘Aoxomoxoa’ (1969), ‘Bear’s Choice’ Vol 1. and ‘Blues For Allah’ (1975). Almost at the same time ‘The Worst of Jefferson Airplane’ (1970) was released. ‘Traffic’s Mr. Fantasy’ (1967) and ‘The Low Spark’ of the ‘High Heeled Boys’ (1971) which were released by Music India Limited in early nineties

(1990-91), were re-released during 1993-94. In 1991-92 two early 'Pink Floyd' albums, (featuring Syd Barrett) - 'Piper at the Gates of Dawn' (1967) and 'A Saucerful of Secrets' (1968) were released by H. M. V., followed by 'Ummaguma' (1969) which was again re-circulated during 1994-95. 'Relics' (1970) which was out of stock for sometime was re-released during 1994-95. Finally, in 1996-97, three albums 'The Wall' (1979), 'The Final Cut' (1983) and 'Mare' (1969), have been released putting an end to the huge amount of second hand recording sales in Free School Street. During 1994 two new Woodstock 69 compilations—'Woodstock Diary' and 'Best of Woodstock' were also released. From 1991-92, H. M. V. were releasing a series of recordings. Mainly compilations, called 'Masters of Rock', which featured numerous sixties bands such as 'Ten Years After', 'Procol Harum', 'Canned Heat', 'The Band' etc. One might also mention the release of numerous Frank Zappa tapes, Eric Clapton's 'Rainbow Concert', John Lennon's 'Plastic Ono Band' (1970) or Janis Joplin's 'Greatest Hits'. Presently, on visiting a music store one will find early Bob Dylan tapes or Jim Morrison's 'An American Prayer' lying comfortably beside the latest Daler Mehendi, 'Spice Girls' or 'Boyzone' tapes. Finally, the influx of compact discs has made it possible to acquire all those rare recordings which had not been released on tape in India.

It is to be noted that all the recordings mentioned above have very strong psychedelic leanings and varying degrees of counter-cultural associations. Are we to conclude that suddenly in the nineties a considerable amount of audience of this kind of music, have come into existence? I do not think so. The- audience of these bands are and always were a minority who operated through underground shops dealing in pirated recordings, or through private lending and exchanges. The influx of these tapes have somewhat weakened the 'avant-gardism' associated with this genre of music. As a result of this the non-commercial status of the cultural space where such music circulates gets affected to a certain extent. Is it a mere accident that around 1994, a fashionable card-shop using an Aisharya Rai poster as window display decided to replace it by a poster of Jim Morrison. Driving down Dhakuria Bridge in South Calcutta, one could now study the stoned face of Morrison and contemplate on the absurdity of his fate.

Probably it will not be out of place to talk about 'Rhythm N Blues'—the avant-garde music store of South Calcutta. The shop, owned by the much loved 'Parthada', was set up in 1992. It catered to a specific crowd and dealt mainly in jazz, blues and rock music of 1960's and 70's. By 1993 the shop had become a hideout for many young people who flocked into chat, listen to good music and to collect or record those rare albums which would raise their status within their own social space. In 1995 the shop was transformed into a commercial store selling shirts, trousers and also music tapes. The friends and acquaintances who used to run down to record Joan Baez or 'Credence Clear Water Revival' have now become consumers of Lee, Newport, Crocodile and may be also of Pink Floyd. Now-a-days one need not rush to Parthada to photocopy lyrics of 'The Wall' or the poetry of Jim Morrison because they can be easily down-loaded from the Internet. In the 25th anniversary of 'Woodstock 69', when the cult film 'Woodstock' (directed by Michael Wadleigh) was screened at the American Center (USIS) Calcutta, many university students had taken admission to the council just in order to watch the film. Now the frenzy seems nostalgic as Woodstock is regularly aired by 'Channel V.' Have you seen Oliver Stone's Doors? The question has lost its impart and sounds pretty silly. The film has been made almost stale by repeated screenings on 'Star Movies'. Cult concerts like 'Hendrix at Isle of Wight', 'Pink Floyd Live in Pompei', concerts of 'The Who', early 'Rolling Stones' etc. have now found their place at a 'Channel V' slot called 'Mainstage'.

Agastyas, Dhruvas and Neeras in our country have finally been recognized for better or for worse. Once they have been addressed, they now form a part of the much advertised 'Global culture'. '*English, August*' is a logical and necessary step through which the proto-hippie gets ready to be transformed into a proto-yuppie. Henceforth, it might be difficult to identify Agastya, but his mutated version can be readily recognized if we keep our eyes open.

The screening of Kaizad Gustad's film *Bombay Boys* at Calcutta Film Festival—1998, made it quite clear that the mutation process has progressed considerably. The film

traces the experiences of three NRI yuppies who come to India, to search for their roots. Interestingly, Rahul Bose, who played the role of Agastya Sen, stars in this film as one of the heroes. In *Bombay Boys* Rahul Bose happens to play the role of a fashionable guy with a French-cut beard who has very concrete aims and desires. He even falls madly in love with the villain's mistress. The journey is now almost complete and the institutions might sigh in relief for the juvenile Agastya has been rendered harmless. No wonder, the sound-track of *Bombay Boys* features music of a host of popular mainstream bands and artists such as 'Mantra', Anaida, Mehnaaz, Raageshwari and the like.

If I sound over-speculative, let me conclude by a short anecdote. Before the starting of the film *Bombay Boys* at Lighthouse on November 11, 1998, I had asked an acquaintance of mine whether he knew what the film was about. The boy who was himself a film-buff, readily answered—'Have you seen *English, August?* This is a sort of sequel to that film.'

Notes:

1. *English, August*: a film by Dev Benegal, produced by Anuradha Parikh under Tropic Film Production and distributed by 20th century Fox Ltd. (India), 1995.
2. *English, August: An Indian Story*, a novel by Upamanyu Chatterjee, published by Faber and Faber (London) 1988, published in India by Rupa Paperback, 1989.
3. The comment has been made by Mr. Anil Kumar Das, a journalist working with *Cin Ed*, a film society journal bringing out regular write ups on Calcutta Film Festival. This observation was made after he attended the screening of the film *English, August* following the inauguration ceremony of 1st Calcutta Film Festival, on Nov. 9, 1995. I have quoted from his write-up 'Calcutta Film Festival in Films and Around' which has been reprinted in—A Special Issue on 4th Calcutta Film Festival, 1998 brought out by Federation of Film Societies of India (Eastern Region).
4. The lyrics are quoted from 'Mother' which appears in the music album 'The Wall', composed by the rock group Pink Floyd. Mother: © Roger Waters, 1979. Pink Floyd Music Publishers Ltd. P 1979.