

An Excavation of the Orifices of Indian Society: A Study of Upamanyu's Way to Go

Dr. Md. Irshad

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Government Engineering College, Madhubani, (Bihar)
India

Abstract

Upamanyu Chatterjee highlights the realistic picture of Indian society in *Way to Go*. The novel presents a dismal picture of life. It describes the unhappy story of an equally unhappy family. The most outstanding themes of the present novel are death, old age and tedium. Chatterjee presents his idealism and his stark protest in a mask of black humour.

Key Words: Idealism, Life, Protest, Realism, Society

All human things are subject to decay

When fate summons Monarch must obey

Mac Flacknoe, Dryden

Upamanyu Chatterjee's brilliant novel, *Way to Go* is an excavation of the orifices of Indian society. It continues the unhappy story of an equally unhappy family of *The Last Burden*. The underbelly of modern India is presented very vividly by Upamanyu.

Way to Go opens with a scene that is strongly reminiscent of *English August*: An Indian story of Upamanyu. Jamun, the protagonist of *Way to Go* is genteel, lazy, selfish, struggling with words, fantasizing about death, and branded loser. He goes to the police station to report his father's disappearance Shyamananda, a semi-paralysed old man. In the constable's room with its "glum blue walls, was tubelit.... a doorway without a door,¹ Jamun has to give the detail and comprehensive information of the routine inquiry.

..... Tell me. Name?

Mine? Or my father's? My father's,
Shyamanand'

Full name and address!'

Jamun gave them

A full description of the missing person?'

Your relationship with missing person?

He is my son. I am his father. Damn

I mean, he is my father. I am his son

..... The profession of missing person?

He retired from government service more than

twenty five years ago.

Any hobby, passion or interest of missing person?.....

Missing person was Male or Female?

'Male'

'He had any love Relationship with anybody?'

'No'

Any quarrel, dispute, any enmity with anyone? (P.5-9)

Way to Go is obviously a universal protest against the human condition. Chatterjee presents a protest and idealism very vividly here. Simply it seems that the novel shows that death is all around and our life is corrupting and filled with disappointments.

Most people live lives of desperation, love and sex have nothing to offer, most relationships are failed ones; we are all rotting corpses on our way to the morgue. Life presents a dismal picture. The novel starts with the unpromisingly clumsy question- "For not having one's dead father enough, could one make amends by loving one's child more?" – and proceeds to fail to answer the question for the next 350-odd pages. We are reminded here the writers like Kingsley, Saul Bellow, Hanif Kureishi, DBC Pierre and others for demonstrating the similar theme.

The sense of helplessness is also cited in *English August*. M. Hemalatha observes:

The protagonist's later life shows the vacuum created by his mother's early demise—a sense of insecurity, being closed-up, for an outlet's emotions, critical outlook towards life and sense of non-belonging²

Jamun simply lacks the energy to jump up and start screaming at his sawdust-brained interrogator the way most of us would. Instead, he glaze-eyedly observes the things happening around him, such as the wasp and the tea-boy entering the room at the same time. Eventually he is in a near-comatose state, reading off dimly remembered sentences that he heard someone else say in a similar situation.

Jamun leads a life of quiet resignation and depression. He has an elder brother, Burfi, who went to jail for battering his wife. Jamun was absolutely unable to continue his relationship with Kasturi, the mother of his child.

Death and departure are the theme of this novel. One of the neighbours commits

suicide and another dies of natural causes. 'On new year's day, in the morning, neighbour Ganguly died'. (P.261.) But the focus of the story is unexplained disappearances rather than plain old mortality. There are three unexplained absences, starting with the boys' 85-year-old father, Shyamanand. He was partially paralysed by a stroke twenty years ago and can scarcely hobble around the house, leave alone run away from it. Nevertheless, he vanishes without a trace one day and, after some weeks, so does the neighbour, Naina Kapur.

'Missing person's full name and address?'

'Naina Kapur. Mrs. The address you know.' (p.135)

Finally, Jamun himself succumbs to banishment, leaving his brother to perform the laborious task of filling out yet another missing person form at the local police station.

In a country of billion people, Jamun had mused on his way home in an auto rickshaw driven by a scruffy type bright-eyed with Cocaine; it was easy to disappear...

That was how Shyamanand must have gone, that was how Jamun wanted to go. Then there were others----- Mukherjee the chemist, the forsaken Naina Kapur. (P.231)

Without doubt, the novel is about the humdrum atrocities with which the cloth of modern India is woven. The helplessness of Jamun is noticed here:

My insomnia therefore, Jamun told himself repeatedly night upon night for weeks after his father's

disappearance, doesn't surprise me in the least. It in fact would worry me terribly if I slept well because that means I had nothing to worry about, as though it was well. (P 163)

The exploration and excavation of the orifices of Indian society are going on in the whole novel. Jamun and Barfi belong to a world of tedium, despair, and violence. A tenant renders a building untenable by committing suicide within its premises, the presumption that a ghost will be a co-squatter dissuades most prospective tenants. Lobesh Monga, the builder, stands for the vicious, corrupt, nonstop energy of the new India shining. And Jamun's former life is presented by his wife's TV serial, *cheers Zindagi*.

Death, old age and tedium constitute the most powerful themes of the novel.

*And old age is but a paltry thing
A tattered coat upon a bamboo stick
.....*

The sudden disappearance of Shyamananda makes Jamun nervous:

*So ever since Shyamanad's
disappearance Jamun startled each
time by the ringing of the gate bell,
had gone with a rapidly beating heart
to check who it was, thinking on each
occasion that the father---prodigal in
his irresponsibility, his toughness---the
father after having been buffeted
about a good bit by the slings and
arrows, had at last returned home.
(P.126)....*

The relationship between father and son in various hues of human emotions is vivid in the episodes where Jamun and Shyamananda can be heard chatting the evenings away in

their small parlour about their favourite topic – death.

Furthermore, Madhumati was bewildered when she came to know that Jamun and Barfi didn't even know the names of their maternal grandparents and their paternal grandmother.

'Well, there are some relatives we've never met, defensively elaborated Jamun to Madhumati, and some we haven't seen in forty years. (p. 187)

Relationships can be sustained and developed only through mutual understanding and patience. Family disruption is also noticed here. In short, Upamanyu Chatterjee, like Webster in Eliot's poem, does seem "much possessed by death". The novel *Way to Go* is a universal protest against the human condition,

No one escaped from life. (p. 312)

Defecation, death and sex merge into one another in the jumble of Jamun's thoughts as he ponders the meaning of the filial bond and family ties.

Unpleasant occasion- the death of a loved one, for instance, always more unbearable than one's own---were just those incidents and accidents that one had neither anticipated nor bargained for. (P.127)

Again the trouble of Jamun goes on:

The more the time passes, the more depressed you become
True. And the more you dream of
killing yourself. (P.69)

Furthermore, the conversation suggests the crisis of Jamun:

Your father might have gone abroad,
you know.
Don't be silly. Where?

I don't know. He always wanted to.
Paris?
Don't be silly. How? He doesn't even
have a passport.
(P.116)

The mental agony of the protagonist is vivid
in the following lines:

Every day in his wanderings, Jamun
saw a dozen old men who resembled
his father; when with thudding heart
he approached them, they
metamorphosed into a seller of Vedic
aphrodisiacs, or an insurance clerk
who doubled as a homoeopath in his
off-duty hours, or a yogi in search of a
fan following. Every day in his
wanderings he saw a dozen old
women who resembled his mother, he
truly needed to be drugged, he felt, to
maintain equilibrium, to enjoy in those
bylaws the hallucinatory effects of his
intoxication.

Shyamanand was dead. Gone (P.357)

Anusua Mukherjee observes:

Works Cited:

1. Chatterjee, Upamanyu: *Way To Go*, Penguin Books , New Delhi, 2010, p.4
(All further citations are to this edition and the page numbers are given at the end of the
quotations in parentheses)
2. Hemalatha, M, *Cultural Crisis in Upamanyu Chatterjee's English August: An Indian
Story*, Punya Bhoomi, Vol. I, No.1, Jan,2010, p.79
3. Mukherjee, Anusua, *Much possessed by Death*, Way To Go by Upamanyu Chatterjee,
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Chatterjee does seem to be more in
love with easeful death than life.
Jamun's ruminations on suicide have a
lively quality that no paeans to life can
quite match. The progression from
death to life is written into the novel's
structure, which repeats and
substitutes endings with beginnings.
Yet the narrative pull is undeniably
backwards, towards the drowsy
numbness promised by hash, and
finally, by death.³

Jamun's restlessness continues towards the
end of the novel:

The father was never seen again by his
sons.

'Is he dead'? Had demanded Jamun of
his crotchety manager of Ma Durga
Pure Vegetarian Lodge and Final Rest
Home Cash Only Credit Please. 'Can I
stop searching'? He couldn't, He
didn't, for not for a time because
several others had seen him.....
Indeed seemed to see him everyday.
(P.355 – 356)

To conclude, we can say that *Way to Go*
presents very vividly the realistic picture of
life. Individual conflicts have been pin
pointed here very keenly.