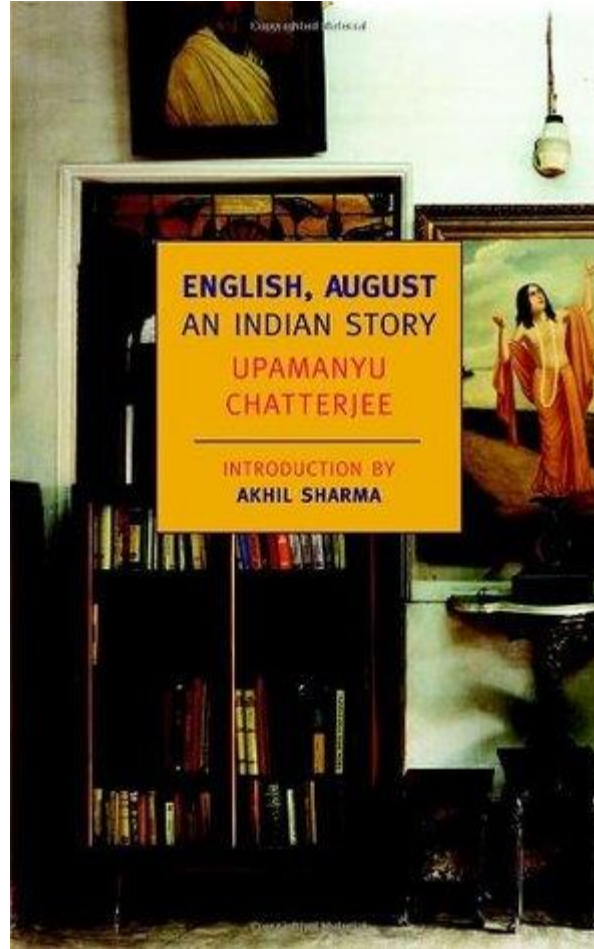


Self-Realization in Upamanyu Chatterjee's  
*English August: An Indian Story*

M. Maheswari, M.A., M.Phil.

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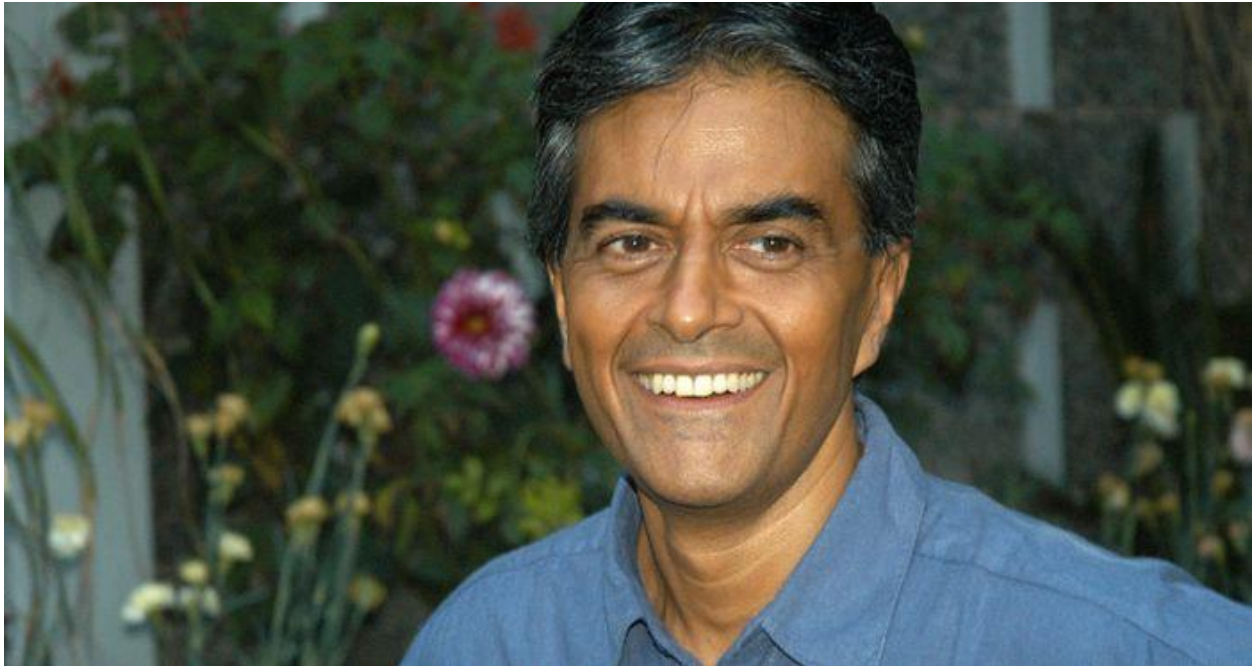


**Abstract**

Self-Realization is an expression used in discussions relating to spiritual matters, psychology, and in religions. Mortimer Adler as a critic defines self-realization as freedom from external coercion including cultural expectations, political and economic freedom from worldly attachments and desires, etc. Dictionaries define *self-realization* as “the realization or fulfilment of one's own potential or abilities” (<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/self-realization?s=t>)

Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English August* (1988) carries a subtitle, *An Indian Story*. It clearly underlines the protagonist Agastya's hybridized position. The novel projects the troubled consciousness of Agastya and portrays the conflict within his fractured self. The conflict finally forces him to step out of his colonial self, his western education and training and discover himself through his own cultural moorings.

**Keywords:**



**Upamanyu Chatterjee**

Courtesy: <http://alchetron.com/Upamanyu-Chatterjee-455208-W>

**Agastya, the Protagonist**

Upamanyu Chatterjee made his debut as a novelist with his maiden novel, *English August: An Indian Story* in 1988. The novel also presents an inclusive guised profile of Agastya Sen, the IAS Officer on probation, posted at a Mofussil town Madna. Agastya Sen is a misfit in the Indian Administrative set-up. He belongs to the new generation, 'the generation of apes' (EAIS 280), 'the Cola generation' and 'the generation that doesn't oil its hair (EAIS 47). He is 'an absurd combination, a boarding-school-English-Literature education and an obscure name from Hindu myth' (EAIS 129). He is named after the great Hindu rishi, Agastya who stopped the Vindhyas from growing up and drank up the ocean. However, his conduct, words and deeds

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stand out in contrast to his mythical counterpart. From “‘Agastya’ he becomes ‘August’, ‘Ogu’ and ‘the English type’”. His school-friends call him ‘last Englishman’, ‘hey English’, ‘hey Anglo’ and even sometimes ‘hello Mother Tongue’ (EAIS 85). Agastya Sen is an offspring of mixed parentage His Bengali father, Madhusudan Sen is the Governor of West Bengal and his mother is a Goan Christian woman. This renders him a cultural mongrel.

### **A Conversation between Modern Youth**

The novel opens with an informal conversation between Agastya, who is about to leave for Madna for his probationary period as an IAS officer, and Dhruvo, Agastya’s friend who has been back from Yale University after his higher studies. Agastya’s journey poses many questions; Dhruvo says, “What you do for sex and marijuana in Madna? (EAIS 3) Agastya finds himself trapped in a difficult situation like “the fallen Adam” (EAIS 5) in this place burning under boiling heat aggravated by mosquito menace. He feels a strange sense of desolation, alienation and frustration, for he thinks he is simply wasting his time.

Agastya suffers from lambent dullness and boredom. He considers himself as one “with no special attitude for anything,” (EAIS 3) and thinks, “I should have been a photographer, or a maker of as films something like that, shallow and urban” (EAIS 13). He considers himself a misfit, anchorless, unbalanced and misplaced and does not seem to enjoy the role he has earned for himself by virtue of his competitive qualifications. Familiar to metropolitan life, he finds happiness in nothing and thinks of himself as misbegotten in a world which he does not seem to fit in. Agastya does not enjoy his new role and finds it difficult to get used to the working of his job and the place. He feels “emptier than usual” (EAIS 134) and thinks that he is wasting his time there. He suffers from strange loneliness whereas he had wished to be alone. He considers himself as one of the vanished in Madna. He relapses quite often into fantasy to escape from being “ravaged by mosquitoes with no electricity, with no sleep in a place he disliked, totally alone with a job that did not interest him, in murderous weather, and now feeling madly sexually aroused”(EAIS 92).

### **Agastya Sen’s Official Status and Training**

In this novel, the young civil servant Agastya Sen is sent off for a year's training in district administration to a small and uneventful district town called Madna. Brought up in cosmopolitan cities like Calcutta and Delhi all his life, Agastya finds it difficult to adjust to the ambience in Madna. Agastya's friend Dhruvo comments, "I've a feeling, August, you're going to get hazaar... in Madna" (EAIS 123). This sets much of the tone of the novel as a marked pointer to the cultural confusion of Agastya. Agastya also recognizes the confusion: "Amazing mix, the English we speak...our accents are Indian, but we prefer August to Agastya" (EAIS 1).

### **Getting to Know Real World – Too Remote for Agastya**

Agastya Sen who is more than a thousand kilometers away from Delhi and Calcutta does not share the social and cultural prescriptions in Madna. While in Madna, he used to think about his past life. He has been through the best education from boarding school in Darjeeling and St. Stephen's college, Delhi and now he is the IAS trainee. He is, now, disconnected from this academic tradition that made him competent enough to pass the UPSC examination. He receives informal education from his father and uncle through distant communication. But it is too inadequate to remove his disinterest in and aversion for job and place. Besides, he is cut off from any religious system so far and it causes his cultural estrangement that creates a feeling of social isolation in him. Nissim Ezekiel in his review of *English, August: An Indian Story* says, "It is Agastya's Darjeeling school that established his alienation, of which he remains conscious virtually throughout this Indian story" (qtd in Kadam.G 106).

Agastya Sen, sensitive, young, lover of music, with a public school education and Masters in English literature finds real India too remote either for his comprehension or active intervention. Delhi and Calcutta, the two metropolis are part of his past. Agastya Sen's public school education alienates him from his cultural heritage and his position as an IAS officer distances him from the masses.

### **Alienation**

Agastya Sen is preoccupied with alienation because of his dislocation and displacement in Madna. His divided self is unable to hold communion with anything around him in the society in which he lives. Upamanyu Chatterjee problematizes Agastya Sen's alienation by making him

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an alienated hero. It is, therefore, intended to explore and explicate Agastya's psychograph in order to find out the causes of his sense of alienation.

Agastya Sen does not suffer from any financial concerns as he belongs to the well-to-do urbanized elite family. Besides, he has been selected for the most coveted job. His alienation seems to be related to his estrangement from the culture, society and his own self. He suffers from cultural alienation, social alienation and self-alienation. He suffers not only from outer but also from the inner problems caused by his dislocation and displacement to a rural town, Madna.

### **Complex Bureaucracy and Agastya Sen**

Son of a Governor, Anglicized and megapolitan, Agastya Sen is introduced into the elite Indian Administrative Service when he is 23. Apparently Agastya Sen's is a success story. But he fails to become part of his new set up. He stands alone and detached and scans the whole bureaucratic structure with the objectivity of a man of science. India's complex bureaucracy is an unwieldy bequest of Raj and in spite of its Indianization, the bureaucracy in India continues to retain much of its imperial character. The bureaucrats exhibit the old accessories of importance like the "flashing orange light on the roof of the car" with technical attitudes like "If the country is moving it is because of us only" (E AIS 58). Self-importance is the norm rather than the exception, all in the name of maintaining the dignity of office. The reason for such self-importance "to be able play God" over thousands of kilometers (the administrative territory under one's control) is "not conducive to humility" (E AIS 39).

### **Extreme Points of Unreal Existence**

Agastya Sen's first glimpse of Madna, a small provincial town in the South, where he is posted as a trainee, disturbs and unsettles him: "...cigarette-and-paan dhabas, disreputable food stalls, both lit by fierce kerosene lamps, cattle and clanging rickshaws on the road... he felt as if he was living someone else's life" (E AIS 5). Delhi and Madna seem to be "two extreme points of an unreal existence" (E AIS 177) and naturally real India and those who rule it do not originally connect.

### **The Goal is to Put up an Image**

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As soon as Agastya realizes that the system of Government is all about putting up an image. The image of the officer is all-important and he finds everyone in the elite circle vying with each other in trying to put up an image. If the SDM of Rameri, Mr. Menon's arrogance is widespread among IAS officers, there is Rajan with his 'egregious pomposity.' But then the yawning gap between their human, fallible, vulnerable and erring selves and their perfect public image is by his seniors. Srivastav, the District Collector of Madna cautions him, "As an IAS officer you can't mix with everybody. It's not a job...where what you do after office is entirely your own private business..." (EAIS 80), ironically the *Dainik* reports that the same Srivastav was having an extramarital affair with a female BDO of Nurana who later committed suicide. Agastya's identity is also super imposed in Madna. "...Mr.Sen, IAS?" "...IAS was always to be attached to his name; it almost became his surname" (EAIS 5). One also has to look like a bureaucrat: "...a bureaucrat ought to be soft and clean-shaven, bespectacled ..." and Agastya's friend Dhruvo tells him, "...you don't look the role" (EAIS 3). Later, Agastya's efficiency as an officer is also attributed to his being as IAS. The residents of Jompanna where he is posted as a BDO say, "IAS after all" (EAIS 270). From dress to demeanour, style to functioning, an IAS Officer is expected to play a pre-defined role and play it to perfection.

### **The Urban-Rural Divide and Other Divisions**

Agastya's sense of alienation deepens not finding a reasonable answer to the question that he is. He lacks a define sense of identity which comes from being rooted in one's culture. Here the notion of dislocation and identity are interconnected. Every human subject is necessarily "encultured" and an identity is constituted out of cultural experience. Agastya has no doubt that he is an Indian, a Bengali. But he is distanced from ties that bind-family, friends, history, and myths of the land. Brought up by surrogate parents in the absence of a mother, educated in a boarding school in Darjeeling when he paid occasional visits to his father, Agastya does not develop very strong family bonds. Home is not for him the place, which "is the reservoir of public myths and private memories" (qtd in Bhowmick 74). Here he does not get his education or training in the indigenous cultural texts, such as the Bhagavata, the Puranas or the Gita, English translation of the Ramayana is a mere literary curiosity for him and while at Madna when he reads a verse aloud from the Gita, "Strong men know not despair, Arjuna, for this wins neither heaven nor earth" his own voice sounds strange and unfamiliar (EAIS 195), he is unable

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to connect; does not feel connected and the words of the *Gita* do not register in his mind. He desperately feels the need for believing in something, “in anything beyond himself” (EAIS 273), but fails.

Agastya recalls that all the while Durga Puja meant “watching the women in eye blinding silk, and releasing balloons against the sky” (EAIS 163); faith for him has always been just festivity. Always desirous of being an Anglo with Keith or Allan for a name, with an ability to speak in English with their accent, Agastya fails to realize the mythical import in his name. And his name is anglicized from the name of a revered sage in the *Ramayana* to English August. Pultu kaku is anguished and angry when he hears the name August, he considers it as a “mimic” of “European Junkies”. Agastya, August, Ogu, Mr. Sen IAS, his numerous “...names seemed like aliases, for his different lives” (EAIS 259).

### **The Plight of the Cola Generation**

The novel however does not focus on Agastya’s plight alone but on the plight of the entire “cola generation” who like Agastya suffer from a sense of inauthenticity and dislocation. Agastya’s childhood friend Dhruvo with a Ph.D from Yale is bothered about everything that doesn’t hang together: “Yale and Durga Puja”, listens to Keith Garrett Scott Joplin, sees a Herzog film or a Carlos Saura but says “it’s unreal” (EAIS 153). His other friend Mahindra Bhatia, now a Forest officer in Madna, with his fascination for western lifestyle, is ready to contact AIDS simply because it is raging in America. Mere acquaintances while in college Agastya and Mahindra find themselves coming closer together with their feelings of alienation and dislocation in Madna. They are all hybrids and although their “hybridity delights”, it rankles when it comes too close to “erasing comfortable boundaries” (qtd in Bhowmick 75).

An identity involves a continual interface and exchange of cultural performances that in turn produce a mutual and mutable recognition of cultural identity. Agastya tries to feel settled and assumes some kind of role to fit into the image of a bureaucrat. He has to act out the role of a bureaucrat. Consciously, he tries to sound arrogant, “Sir, my name is Sen, I am an IAS officer” (EAIS 85), while introducing himself to Mr. Bajai, the District Development Officer. He starts lying and says that he has done his B.A. from Cambridge, that his wife is a Norwegian Muslim while he is still unmarried. In time he learns to ‘Scowl’ like Srivastav donning what is termed as

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the official face, picks up a few official ease, learns to make “night halts”, plays personality tricks even with a care-taker cook (EAIS 178). While posted as a BDO in Jompanna he seemingly tries to establish a purposeful dialogue with the intriguing parties and fails, learns to react to most topics in the Block Panchayat meetings with “competent bureaucratic vagueness” (Yes, I’ll look into that...So make a note of that etc.) (EAIS 253) But finally he is unable to manage with the multiple roles that he is expected to play: the tentative and oppositional identities frustrate him and he makes a hasty retreat into his secret life. He longs “For privacy” “...Marijuana and nakedness, and soft, hopelessly incongruous music (Tagore or Chopin), and the thoughts that ferment in isolation” (P.26), a place where he could “fantasize without restraint” (EAIS 92).

### **Existential Conflict**

His life at Madna can be attributed as existential conflict. In his three part model of the self, Jean Paul Sartre who is a critic describes the nature of such conflict resulting out of a disconnect between/among Being-for-itself which incorporates the self’s action, will and idea; Being-for-others where the self constructs an image of itself as an object, as it is observed by everybody; Being-in-the-world which derives from the consciousness of the world as a sum total of possibilities. All these three are in constant conflict making Agastya confused over his identity.

Agastya’s past does not integrate into his present. The dislocation between his present and past makes him restless. He thus seeks help in the psychedelic and unreal world of drugs. Time and again his mind goes back to his past and Madna, he longs for simple touches of his past. His only ambition while at Madna is to clutch the simple things associated with Pultukaku’s house in Delhi, “Simple things, good food, a lawn shaded by neem, jacaranda and gulmohar trees...” (EAIS 147) He tries to receive his sense of belonging there. His Masters in English had not prepared him for the ground realities of the country. The world of ideas and the practical world seem to be wide apart and in perpetual conflict as Srivastav, another bureaucrat remarks, “That a young man in Azamganj should find it essential to study something as unnecessary as *Hamlet* that is absurd...” (EAIS 60) Chaucer and Swift become irrelevant while dealing with problems like scarcity of water in a drought prone area or solving the problem of a petitioner whose land is intruded by someone else or tackling problems like a police patil conniving for a

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murder (E AIS 18). The mixed nature of problems exasperates Agastya. Remembrances of things of past continue to mock him with images of lost worlds and “semblances of a pattern” (E AIS 20). But he realizes that perhaps he longs for the past just to escape an uncongenial present.

The only company Agastya keeps is of bureaucrats. R.N. Srivastav, the Collector and District Magistrate of Madna, and Dhiraj Kumar, SP of Madna are reasonably competent senior bureaucrats, the mentors of Agastya who explained him the details of the corrupt bureaucracy in India and the role of political bastards in it. Other buggers in bureaucracy such as Shankar, Govind Sathe, Mahendra Bhatia, Bajaj, Menon and Mohan Gandhi are all aliens for whom Madna-posting is a punishment. They teach Agastya nothing but pour oil on his troubled mind by compelling him to perform some unusual things that do not suit to his status. All of them are uninterested, lazy and incompetent. Agastya is always out boozing with them. He does not mind the business of the Monthly Review Meeting of Revenue Officers. He avoids deliberately listening to the Collector’s ‘an alien tongue on alien topics’ (E AIS 41) and spends on hours writing letters to his father and uncle to Dhruvo and to Neera about his sense of dislocation. He leaves the meeting on the pretence of the call from SP and goes with Sathe to the Madna International and gets stunned at daytime.

### **Just Blame the Educational System!**

Agastya’s uncle, too, blames the educational system that does not improve Agastya’s societal attitude. He is an intensely tempted by Western ideas, attitudes and English language. Agastya Sen believes in Mr. Sathe who says that each language is an entire culture and ‘hazaar fucked’ English makes him alienated from his native culture and cultural values. His existential dilemma is an outcome of his lack of societal responsibilities. He dislikes an imposed living, therefore, leads three lives in Madna: the official, the in official and secret life of jogging, boozing and masturbation in the Rest House. Often he thinks about his situation and job: “Why he wasn’t setting down, whether his sense of dislocation was only temporary, or whether it was a warning it was a warning single” (E AIS 65).

Agastya fails to relate himself to the society represented by Madna District. He does not know even the real Madna beyond its offices. He does not find any force for trial development as

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for him inaction is better than action. Agastya does not think serious shrewdness of Indian Administrative Service. He cares neither for its dignity nor for its service. Even he does not believe in Kumar who says, “This is India, bhai, an independent country, and not Raj, we are servants of people (EAIS 23). Agastya does not keep his eyes and ears open to learn about the District Administration. He takes delight more in the *Bhagavadgita* and Marcus Aurelius’s Meditations than the District Gazetteer, City Survey Manual and Manual of rules and standing Orders related to land Records Establishment. His lack of determination and competence excites him to write to his daddy and uncle about his wasting of time in Madna. Discontent and dissatisfaction make him suffer from lambent dullness as his innermost desire is “to lie in the winter sun on the roof of the house in Delhi, or that decaying mansion in behala, smoke read a little, listen to a little music, have sex with someone, anyone, who would not exist before and after the act, and work only so I can do all the rest” (EAIS 136).

### **Problems of Development**

The protagonist becomes more active administrator when he is promoted as the Block Development Officer at Jompanna. He has to face many challenges in this drought-prone area like the acute shortage of water and mass illiteracy. However, he is favored by the Gods, despite his uneasy spirit. His encounter with the life of the tribal people touches him precisely because, as an IAS, he is open to human suffering. Agastya’s friend Mohan has had both his arms cut off for sexual knowledge of a tribal woman. He sees the revenge on Mohan as “insane,” and tries to encourage a rational approach to the problems of people whose lives are governed by instinct. The irony of his position is lost on him for his life has consisted in indulging every kind of physical instinct in the privacy of his own room, while meditating on the meaning of life.

However, instead of development, Agastya retreats from the problems of the tribals. He is not interested in ‘skewed development of Jompanna’ (EAIS 241). He brings only half his mind to work and his other silent. It is a beginning of his downward journey. He visits Chipanthi which has been the heart of the Naxalites. He enjoys the dance of the tribal women. Within two months, Agastya feels as restless as ever. He feels tired of journey after journey, experiences the sense of displacement at Madna, Jompanna, Gorapak, Chipanthi and Mariagarh.

## **Inaction Better Than Action?**

By the end of the novel, Agastya is permanently stoned with other strange bureaucrats in spite his promotion as the Assistant Collector of Koltanga. He assumes inaction better than action, avoids deploying prohibitive measures to control rural exploitation and leaves for Calcutta anticipating of a year's leave to discover his self. He reads Marcus Aurelius: "Today I have got myself out of all my perplexities; or rather, I have got perplexities out of myself-for they were not without, but within; they lay in many in my own outlook" (EAIS 288).

Agastya's story is unfinished. He reconsiders his idea of leaving coveted job for future prospects. Agastya Sen alienates from his job, society and culture, yet his alienation is not genuine. The freelance writer and critic, Geeta Doctor in her review of the novel says that Chatterjee succeeds "in making both August's alienation real and the atmosphere of Madna oppressive himself. It has such a feeling of truth that one cannot help but wonder, whether English August is not a thinly disguised autobiography after all" (qtd in Kadam.G 110).

## **The Novelist and the Protagonist**

Agastya's wishes and environment has been fully worked out due to the emotional involvement of the novelist with his protagonist. The devastating effects of alienation are despair, boredom, disenchantment, the sense of meaninglessness of life. However, Agastya Sen's alienation does not seem convincing for how far it is deep-seated malady, a fad or a temporary posture is uncertain. It can be said that Agastya is a misplaced person who prefers the quest of personal happiness to social happiness as it has been the general tendency of his generation.

Agastya's sense of alienation is a product of his own consciousness which in part is linked to the process of his growing up, to his several weaknesses, hypocrisies and in part to his way of leading life on a superficial plane. Finally he had moved to a position of openness. He knows of himself and the world. He proposes to take a year off to discover himself.

Agastya's story is unfinished. He reconsiders his idea of leaving coveted job for future prospects. Agastya Sen alienates from his job, society and culture, yet his alienation is not genuine. Through the alienation Agastya realizes himself.

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Upamanyu Chatterjee has wonderfully portrayed the theme of self-realization in his novel *English August: An Indian Story*. In the novel, our exile-hero is not alienated from men and society. He is very much exists in the world of human beings. He wants to live life fully. He is alienated being; he is in fact seeking to conquer their selves. Returning to and going away from one's own culture or alien culture are of equal significance, though he is inconsequential in terms of a conscious realization of the self.

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M. Maheswari, M.A., M.Phil.  
Assistant Professor of English Department  
Sri.Krishnasamy Arts & Science College  
Sattur - Sivakasi - Kalugumalai Rd.  
Mettamalai 626203  
Tamil Nadu, India [mahesariivukutty@gmail.com](mailto:mahesariivukutty@gmail.com)

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