



A Critical Study of Amit Chaudhuri's Selected Fiction

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ABSTRACT: The present research paper aims to study Amit Chaudhuri's craft in his various novels and in general. He is someone who breaks all stereotypes of how an Indian writer should write. He creates his own style and themes. His themes have no inclination such as diasporic, nationalism, feminism etc. He writes about life. He makes unimportant things important. He uses the techniques of de-familiarization. He represents normal things in an extraordinary way. He writes in a lyrical manner. The works that have been selected for the study are: *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991), *Afternoon Raag* (1993), *Freedom Song* (1998), *A New World* (2000), *The Immortal* (2009), *Odysseus Abroad* (2014) and *Friend of My Youth* (2017). His sentences blur the difference between prose and poetry, the paragraph and the stanza. His words echo music. His writing is lyrical.

KEY WORDS: Craft, de-familiarization, lyrical writing, stereotypical, cultural spaces etc.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Amit Chaudhuri is a versatile writer working in numerous genres. He has written fiction, poetry, stories, essays, memoir and literary criticism. His writings have appeared in *The Guardian* and the *London Review of Books*. He has written seven novels: *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991), *Afternoon Raag* (1993), *Freedom Song* (1998), *A New World* (2000), *The Immortal* (2009), *Odysseus Abroad* (2014) and *Friend of My Youth* (2017). Among his non-fiction writings are a critical study of D.H. Lawrence's poetry, *D.H. Lawrence and Difference* (2003), a book of critical essays, *Clearing a Space* (2008) and *Calcutta: Two Years in the City* (2013). He is currently working as a professor of Contemporary Literature at the University of East Anglia, England. He has also edited an anthology of Indian Writing, *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*.

Amit Chaudhuri's first novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991) is about a boy of twelve years, Sandeep, who comes to spend his holidays at his uncle's home in Calcutta. Here, he cherishes simple joys of daily routine – cooking, bathing, eating, and sleeping in contrast to his organized and lonely life in Bombay. Chaudhuri tries to capture the faded comfort and happiness of childhood. The novel is about the pure innocent memories of small middle class homes in India.

Chaudhuri's use of language in this novel reveals an extraordinarily keen sensibility. A sense of nostalgia suffuses the novel. The little pure moments of childhood and the disappointments of daily life are brought out beautifully. The central point in *A Strange and Sublime Address* is the impression created on children's minds by the prevalent culture and lifestyle in a particular place. Chaudhuri's descriptions remind us of our childhood memories such as the sounds of radio babble "like a local idiot" and of thunder that, after a "moment's heavy silence," speaks "guruguruguru" (13, 67).

Each and every detail in *A Strange and Sublime Address* is described properly. The author tries to engage with human life in a detailed manner. The Character of Sandeep seems autobiographical. It is similar to Chaudhuri's childhood. Chaudhuri beautifully draws a comparison between the simple joys of childhood and the corporate world. The novel also move back and forth between the city of Calcutta and Bombay. Calcutta offers a carefree life whereas Mumbai offers an organized life. Sandeep feels trapped here in Bombay.

Chaudhuri narrates the life of Sandeep as a grownup man. He lives with his parents in Mumbai in a multi-storey building. Life in Mumbai is rather excessively organized, mechanical and lonely. Sandeep feels closer to Calcutta and derives great pleasure in the company of his cousins. While describing Sandeep's big apartment in Mumbai, Chaudhuri suggests Sandeep's craving for a carefree life: He was like Adam in charge of paradise, given dominion over the birds and fishes; he was too much in the foreground. He hated being in the

foreground; he wanted a housefly's anonymity. But here, in Chhotomama's house, he pulsed into life and passed into extinction according to his choice, he had liberty. (A Strange and Sublime Address 28)

The phrase 'housefly's anonymity' is marked by suggestion evoking the ordinariness and squalor of common people's lives. While Mumbai suggests a boring life, Calcutta offers a contrast as the place of Sandeep's childhood memories. Sandeep's impression of the city is built more on his hopes of recreating a lost childhood. The evoked mood is that of loss of a carefree life.

The novel, thus, deals with two themes - simple joys of childhood and the evocation of a way of life. These themes are inextricably linked with each other. Chaudhuri describes simple acts such as a family having a lunch beautifully. His writing is lyrical which makes simple acts very unique. Chaudhuri points out that Bengalis are very specific about their food and eating-habits. He describes different food items prepared from the same material. For instance, the novel reveals Bengalis have cultivated a taste for good food prepared differently:

Pieces of boiled fish, cooked in turmeric, red chilli paste, onions and garlic, lay in a red fiery sauce in a flat pan; rice, packed into an ovenwhite cake, had a spade like spoon embedded in it, slices of fried abergine were arranged on a white dish; that was served from another pan with a drooping ladle; long complex filaments of banana flower, exotic, botanical, lay in yet another pan in a dark sauce; each plate had a heap of salt on one side, a green chilli, and a slice of sweet-smelling lemon. The grown-ups snapped the chillies (each made a sound terse as a satirical retort) and scattered the tiny, deadly seeds in their food. If any of the boys were ever brave or foolish enough to bite a chilli their eyes filled tragically with tears, and they longed to drown in a cool, clean lake. Though chhotomama was far from affluent, they ate well, especially on Sundays, caressing the rice and the sauces on their plates with attentive sensuous fingers, fingers which performed a practical and graceful ballet on the plate till it was quite empty. (A Strange and Sublime Address6)

Chaudhuri even shows the shift in cultural values among two generations. Nehru's India is secular and stands in contrast to the India envisioned by Gandhiji the

India of ceremony and custom(A Strange and Sublime Address61).

Chaudhuri gives importance to such spaces which have been marginalized. These spaces are ignored by others. Chaudhuri's fiction is made up of these spaces. Hilary Mantel observed in *The New York Review of Books* that it is difficult to categorize Chaudhuri. He writes seriously about unserious events. He does not illuminate tragic aspects of life. He observes random and unimportant details and colors them with wonder. There is childlike curiosity in his approach to life. Amit Chaudhuri is a miniaturist who has perfected the art of the moment. He follows Proust in radiating tiny moments ("The Monster We Know").

Afternoon Raag (1993) is a novel about arrivals, departures, new life, old memories, new world and old home. It delineates the experiences of a young Indian student of English Literature at the University of Oxford. The central but nameless character is caught in a complicated love triangle with Mandira and Shehnaz. Loneliness and melancholy trouble him. He has devoted his life to aesthetic pursuits. The novel is also a tribute to Indian classical music. Multiple emotions are evoked with the help of rāgas

Amit Chaudhuri's forte is describing a life of domesticity, routine and small daily rituals. He enchants the reader with simple yet arresting narratives. In *Afternoon Raag* he uses language not primarily to tell a story but to evoke moods, atmosphere and frames of mind: the narrator visualizes Oxford town as it gets transformed into a kind of wartime township during the vacation "because all the young people, with their whistling, their pavement to pavement chatter, their beer-breathed, elbow-nudging polemics, are suddenly gone, leaving the persistent habits of an old way of life" (181).

The narration shifts both spatially and temporally. It does not only present a story but makes us experience an actual experience with minute details of time and place. Every detail of *A Strange and Sublime Address* has deep impact on our memory. The author evokes a child's world-view. It shows the deep involvement of the author with human life. The local spaces are described in such a way to evoke a sense of nostalgia, loss and dislocation.

Fernando Galvan in "On Belonging and Not Belonging" commenting on Chaudhuri says that he belongs to India in his sensibility, but it is not a uniform India. It is India of different cultures, regions, traditions, festivals, rituals, and he is unaware which India he belongs to (46-47). Thus, his identity, ethnicity and belongingness have always been contested. Chaudhuri's works show a deep interest in space and its influence on various characters and events. His focus is on depicting domestic themes. He provides new perspectives while representing Western and the Indian domesticity.

Freedom Song (1998) is set against a backdrop of growing political tension between Hindus and Muslims after the demolition of Babri Mosque in 1992. The novel also examines the dealings among two families living in Calcutta going about their domestic business against a backdrop of civil unrest. Khuku's annoyance with the Muslims is hinted at when their call to worship wakes her up rather early every morning. Her husband Shib is a retired businessman. He is hired to cure a "doomed" candy factory (6). Khuku's brother, Bhola, is worried about his son Bhaskar's involvement with the Communist Party as it may affect his marriage prospects. The book is thus about a family's efforts to marry off a troublesome young fellow. The two friends'

close relationship and their conversations about family, social relationships and Muslims structure the narrative. The events intersecting with the ordinary people's consciousness are Chaudhuri's main concerns, for instance, a scene in which both Khuku and her friend sit and eat oranges, all the while discussing Bhaskar's involvement with the Communist Party.

In *Freedom Song*, Khuku practises various raga. She has a melodious voice. Chaudhuri has translated many Urdu or Hindustani songs into English. At the same time he faithfully writes its Bengali version of the songs for the sake of readers who know both Bengali and English. His translation and the Bengali version read as:

How could I be happy at home?
For if my Shyam has become a Yogi.
Then as a Yogini with him I'll roam.
Aam ki shukhe lo grihe roba?
Aamar shyam Jodi ogo jogi hoh shakhi
Aamio jogini hobo. (53)

The novel, *Freedom Song* begins with music. Khuku's day starts when she gets up from her bed hearing the 'azaan' from distance. This is the beginning of the novel: Each day the azaan rose in the morning.... Meanwhile, the muezzin went on praising the virtues of Allah in syllables that sounded like 'lailallah rasulallah'; and Allah was great, Allah was good and glorious. (106)

A New World (2000) offers a picture of the emotional intricacies of marriage and its failure. It is about Jayojit Chatterjee who lives in America and visits his elderly parents in Calcutta. He feels uprooted and unsettled. His Bengali wife, Amala, puts her husband through a nasty divorce after falling in love with her gynecologist. She has also gained custody of their young son, Vikram or Bonny. Jayojit is allowed to have Bonny with him only during the boy's school vacations. Jayojit feels obligated to take Bonny to Calcutta to get him to meet with his grandfather Admiral Chatterjee and his grandmother Ruby. Through Chaudhuri's precise and evocative writing, the reader experiences Jayojit's inner life and his past, particularly his struggle between the memories of India and of America.

The Immortals (2009) is a story of two families. One belongs to the corporate world and the other to the tradition of music. Music is the thread which ties the two families. The book is about three music lovers: a mother, her son and their guru, who is a classical music teacher. Mallika Sengupta, one of the central characters of the novel, is married to Apurva Sengupta, chief executive of a large corporation. She is interested in learning music.

Mallika's sensitive son Nirmalya also loves classical music. The other pole of the narrative concerns Shyamji, a musician and tutor who instructs Mallika and later Nirmalya. In brief, Chaudhuri interweaves art and relationships, reflecting on the conflict between art and commercial values in an India transformed by globalization.

Odysseus Abroad (2014) foregrounds the issue of culture. It is set in London on one day in the summer of 1985. It is about a young man, Ananda, a literature student.

Ananda's only friend is his uncle Radesh who also lives in London. This is a book about friendship, failure, loneliness, belonging and exile. The motif of journey is used to highlight Ananda's location, dislocation, sense of being and exile. The novel can also be regarded as a parody of Joyce's *Ulysses* as well as Homer's *Odyssey*. The narrative comprises six parts:

Bloody Suitors!, Telemachus and Nestor (Manny – Loss), Eumaeus, Uncle and Nephew, Heading for Town and Ithaca.

Friend of My Youth (2017) is part novel and part memoir. It is a book about friendship, the memories of youth and Mumbai. The narrator had a childhood friend named Ramu who has, for most of his life, been addicted to heroin. In brief, the book embodies the narrator's memories of his childhood. Chaudhuri also explores the nature of friendship, especially the kind of friendship that is formed early in life.

Thus, Chaudhuri is a miniaturist, formalist and suggestive lyricist writer who writes about self and culture. James Wood comments on Chaudhuri in *The New Yorker*:

He has defined that "refutation of the spectacular" throughout his career. Chaudhuri creates impressionistic and poetic atmosphere. He never forces anything on us. There is no detailed plot, no fixed design, no faked "conflict" or other drama. His creations seem more like documentaries rather than fiction. He seems to elaborate that literary pleasure is a human pleasure, as we slowly encounter this strolling, musing, forceful self. (Wood)

The above mentioned novels selected for the study are, thus, spread over the entire writing career of Amit Chaudhuri. Moreover, the selection captures the entire range of Chaudhuri's diverse fictional engagements.

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