

RE-DRAWING THE MODERNIST MAP: READING AMIT CHAUDHURI FOR AUTO FICTION

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Abstract:

*The post-independence and post-modern writer - Amit Chaudhuri - was born in the Calcutta of 1962 and bred in the then Bombay. Shy and suave, he is essentially a poet but is best-known in India as well as abroad for his novels and critical reviews. His novels have been particularly acclaimed for their representation of the numerous insignificant details of our daily life and his power of observing and recording the elusive details of the quotidian has been much appreciated. His astute understanding of middle class Bengalis - in terms of their lifestyle, culture, traditions and values - shows why the regional space has become an integral element of his work, especially his understanding of the middle class modern Indian. In his novels, he has represented Kolkata not as the city it used to be but as a problematic city it has become due to the turmoil caused by political violence and communist rule. In the paper, the attempt will therefore be to examine the transformation of the myth of progress - which was a distinct feature of the 1990s - into the myth of modernity, which was more of a trend in literary writing. The paper also aims to explore how in the process of recreating the local Bengali culture and the middle class Indian society in his novels, Chaudhuri takes the help of his own reminiscences - the memories of his own childhood spent in the 'city of joy' - and blends autobiography with myth. The idea is to trace his novels as **plotless meditations** wherein nothing 'happens'; pages are expended describing, in exquisite prose. Written seemingly out of life, his works are beautiful, intensely observed, yet static and inconsequential more mood pieces than novels. Chaudhuri's luminously intelligent novels thus appropriate a literary tradition that is both his and not his, thereby placing his writing- erudite and playful as it is - on the map of modernism.*

Keywords: *Memory; Modern; Modernity, Myth.*

The post-independence and post-modern writer - Amit Chaudhuri was born in the Calcutta of 1962 and bred in the then Bombay. Shy and suave, he is essentially a poet but is best-known in India as well as abroad for his novels and critical reviews. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and is Professor of Contemporary Literature at the University of East Anglia, with his origins in Sylhet in east Bengal (now Bangladesh), educated in the esteemed institutions of Bombay, in university college, London and Balliol college, oxford, having the ease of a native speaker in speaking and writing English and spending considerable time abroad, he is not at all a Diasporic writer and has a deep attachment to the culture of his country especially that of Bengal, its language and literature as we can easily see in his work.

His novels have been particularly acclaimed for their representation of the numerous insignificant details of the daily life and his power of observation and recording the elusive details of the quotidian has been much appreciated. We can see glimpses of these characteristics in his more ambitious work "Freedom Song" (1995) which examines the relations among the two families living together temporarily in present day Calcutta. *Freedom Song* is vintage Amit Chaudhuri, playing with big ideas while evoking the smallest aspects of everyday life with acute tenderness and extraordinary beauty. The two families' ineffably comic, intrinsically melancholy interactions are rendered with quiet compassion in a way that suggests an Indian *Buddenbrooks* in miniature. It is also considered among some of the most accomplished fiction of the decade.

For the present study, *A Strange and Sublime Address* and *Freedom Song* have been selected as the primary sources. Both the novels have been set with the city of Calcutta as their backdrop. The child's Kolkata which is narrated in *A Strange and Sublime Address* is still present but has been changed by two decades of communist rule and political violence across the country. Thus in a way the narration has been done in such a way as to represent Kolkata not as the city it used to be but as the problematic city that it has become, on account of the turmoil that is caused by political violence and communist rule.

Chaudhuri's other novel *Calcutta: Two years in the City* clearly shows the consummation of Chaudhuri's love of and admiration for the city, all his novels represent the various stages of his fascination with the remarkable city. The Kolkata figuring in his novels has both physical solidity as well as specificity. The author is able to touch, listen to, smell, see and even taste the city. He expertly represents all the sounds- all the noticeable ones and the inaudible ones too like - the chirping of birds, sounds of animals, buzzing of insects and those of other human beings doing their everyday chores. He has been successful in capturing the little sounds of all times of day and can easily differentiate one sound from the other. He can taste and smell with an incredible sensitivity. His novels are full with these small observation of sounds, smells, touch etc. Food, eating and eateries also figure evidently in all his novels. The various ways of preparing food are highlighted because he relishes food imagery and suffuses it with poetry and symbolism.

Raymond Williams once said, "The City has always been an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light and of work and culture as well." There can hardly be any disagreement to this assessment, but there is another significant aspect that the cities have always been problematic too. It can easily be justified that the cities have always been found problematic whether we talk about the cities of Harappa civilization or we consider the city which were in the post-industrial stage around 19th and the 20th centuries and it is still true to the modern cities of the present digital age.

Therefore, when the well-known critic Burton Pike, in the 'Preface' of his immense work, *The Image of the City in Modern Literature (1981)*, writes about Western city: "The city in Western culture has always been problematic" (Pike 1), it is just as true of even a city like Calcutta which is situated in the eastern part of the world. This image of the problematic city has been portrayed realistically in two of Chaudhuri's novels, viz. *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991) and *Freedom Song* (1998) which have a distinct focus on some of the most important problematic aspects of the present-day city of Calcutta such as the problem of unemployment; the slowdown of businesses, especially the small and local industries/enterprises in the city, upsetting the conditions of health and hygiene in the city; the forever lingering issue of the expanding population; the issues concerning social life and relationships in an age-old city like Calcutta and the attendant issue of generation gap. For example, Chaudhuri in *Freedom Song* brings together the world of grown-ups (Older Generations) and the young (Modern Generations) close together to narrate the story of 'freedom' which paradoxically makes every individual to exist in a kind of confinement yet implying that they are experiencing freedom. However, in the post-modern era or in this modern times of globalization a modern Indian experiences a kind of socio-political and economical imprisonment. As the story is told from a grown-up namely Xhuku's point of view, there is no myth or miracle. Only the hard of realities of life is discussed.

The Kolkata of Chaudhuri's childhood was on the verge of transformation. When the most parts of India began to change in the stir of globalization, liberalization and privatisation, Kolkata alone could not resist the change, and to stay in competition it changed itself. So the Bengal and peculiar culture and which Chaudhuri contemplates psychologically to be his home, has passed through multiple transitions. Chaudhuri is able to narrate how this myth of progress gets transformed into the myth of modernity feeding into the forces of globalisation and globalism.

The charm of Calcutta that Amit Chaudhuri has laid is "this kind of ironical relationship between middle-class dullness - the middle-class everyday - and the inspirational and the thoughtful". He was

inspired by childhood memories of a place "at once vernacular and multi-ethnic - people speaking in local dialect Bengali but actually being much more modern and cosmopolitan than their counterparts speaking English in Bombay." He always found his parents' generation interesting in their unanchoredness: "A class of people who are at once there and who are exiled, who are not completely there, who are travelling at the same time." This sense of commonplaceness blended with alienation permeates *A Strange and Sublime Address*; the novel focusses mainly on the place, locality, everyday routine, weather and atmosphere in a deeply unconventional way. Like a suburban Sunday afternoon, the plot seems to stretch time in peculiar but in delightful ways.

His astute understanding of middle class Bengalis - in terms of their lifestyle, culture, traditions and values, the way he actively represents these things and talks about them in his work, - shows why the regional space has become an integral element of his work, especially his understanding of the middle class modern Indian. Chaudhuri has used the regional space (including localities, households, markets, etc.) like one of his characters. His novels can be perceived as an attempt to represent the easy-going, happy life against a wide-ranging general framework without which the short-lived moments of drama would be meaningless. *A Strange and Sublime Address* is a novel of a different kind. It is about a small boy Sandeep who comes to Calcutta in his summer holidays to visit his maternal uncle's (Chhotomama) house. In Bengal, going to the mama's house has a very special meaning. It means all play, no work, and no thrashing either. He spends a month in Calcutta, staying in his Chhotomama's house, playing along with his cousins, adoring the company of his relatives, divulging himself to things and places that he has not known before. Sandeep finds a great joy in this ancient house full of antique objects, old radios and out-of-fashion furniture and here he senses a form of rootedness, a strong bond between brother and brother, and brother and sister.

Alone in Bombay, in his father's huge company flat, he feels too much 'fore grounded', lonely. Here, however, amidst the routine of life, amongst the not-so-important gossip of his aunt and his mother, he discovers a calm world, the world of a middle class Bengali, as it was lived in the seventies. Here everything has played on a low key. The problems that one faces are those concerned with out-modelled cars that would break down in the middle of the road, the back pain of Chhotomama who would ask his sons to press his back just at the right place, the small insects that would enter Babla's ear, or there would not be problems at all. Rather the focus would be on other things: on how Mamima and Saraswati would flutter round Chhotomama as he prepared to go to the office, how they would eat a hearty meal of boal fish in a hot gravy on weekends and how Mamima would perform all the rituals in the prayer room offering *batasha* and cucumber to the gods; how, on a sunny day, his mother and his aunt would dress up in nice shimmering sarees and put on bangles before going out for a relative's house; how they would buy sweets and yoghurt from Ganguram's and how Chhordimoni would recall her younger days. In *A Strange and Sublime Address*, Chaudhuri takes the opportunity to present to us an intimate picture of a Calcutta as yet unwelcomed by the television or the computer, a city lying in the relaxed atmosphere of 'adds' and friendly meets. Amitav Ghosh in his *The Shadow Lines*, present us a picture of pretty much the same type of Kolkata.

In Chaudhuri's another book *Afternoon Raag* when the grown-ups would be asleep, Sandeep, with his cousin would often look through the shutters of the closed windows to the lane outside:

"It was possible, on certain moments, for abhor and Sandeep to call out to a dazed passer-by, 'Eh, stupid!' or 'Faster, fat man!' and close the shutter and become invisible".

In all his novels, Chaudhuri reveals these small incidents in a way that reveals his obvious interest in them; and not simply interest but immersion. He has caught the boundless stream of activity that goes on around us brilliantly and unforgettably. It reminds us of the kind of experimentation that the "stream of consciousness" also arise within it much that is familiar, irrelevant and unimportant. However, revealing it to its last detail had given birth to a captivating form that is very much significant in our present day

context. Amit Chaudhuri's method also has something of that thoroughness and intensity, the precision and deliberateness that is quite striking. He has gone on to explore the numerous ordinary details in a style that points to a fresh way of looking at life. This becomes clear when towards the middle of the novel; we come across a passage, which is significant from the point of view of novelistic techniques:

“[W]hy did these houses seem to suggest that an infinitely interesting story might be woven around them? and yet the story would never be a satisfying one, because the writer, like Sandeep, would be too caught up in jotting down the irrelevances and digressions that make up lives, and the life of a city, rather than a good story-till the reader would shout 'come to the point!'-and there would be no point, except the girl memories the rules of grammar, the old man in the easy-chair fanning himself, and the house with the small, empty porch that was crowded, paradoxically, with many memories and possibilities. The 'real' story, with its beginning, middle and conclusion would never be told, because it did not exist.”

Thus, in *A Strange and Sublime Address* the 'real story' in the general sense does not exist. The conventional pattern with a beginning, middle and an end is not to be found in the novel. The author, like the little boy has been "caught up" with "the irrelevances and digressions that make up lives and the life of a city" and represents it in that haphazard way.

Out of these irrelevant details that the author has mentioned in the novel, the routines, the sounds, the daily humdrums of a middle class Indian life, Chaudhuri works out a pattern that defamiliarises the everyday and point to a new way of assessing the commonplace. His account of life in his novels may be characterized as "The average as the alternative" he seems to be pointing out to the fact that in the middle of our chaotic lives, in our fascination for something amazing, we always lose sight of the routine and normal. This notified may be regarded as the central point in assessing Amit Chaudhuri's novels for without the thoroughly curved pattern that he has presented in his novels. The style that Amit Chaudhuri adopts is also particularly suited to this kind of pattern. It is to the point, detached, comic and often slightly ironic.

Chaudhuri's writing talks about everything like toilets, defecation, copulation, etc. He said in an interview:

“My writing is essentially eventless. I concentrate more on the language and its nuances while I write. It is for my readers to say if my language appeals even to those who do not have their roots in India” (Web).

Chaudhuri chooses for a narrative where the folk, mythic, realism and symbolism form a unified whole. The sights and sounds of Calcutta, its gastronomic joys and the interactions of characters are real, not realistic. Every part in the novel has its proper place and is acutely linked with the child's world-view juxtaposed against choices and attitudes. The detail at once stimulates feeling for the entire narrative, not really one of home sickness but a sense of loss, a feeling of dislocation. Life has an important part in Chaudhuri's works. Bangla language and Calcutta are the most consistent and common features of his work. Every text has two meanings and the interaction between dictionary meaning and contextual meaning may have difference.

In the process of recreating the local Bengali culture and the middle class Indian society in his novels, Chaudhuri takes the help of reminiscence - the memories of his own childhood spent in the 'city of joy' - and blends autobiography with myth. But, it is not his story that the author is writing about; he is only using his own past to create something beautiful which has its own flow despite the fact that his works do not contain any particular plot or storyline. In other words, his works may be labelled as auto-fiction. Chaudhuri's describes each and every action in his novel. He focuses on the smallest bit of the life of his characters and is very observant of customs, traditions and superstitions of the middle class whose lifestyle comprises the way ordinary people chat, take bath, dress themselves, pray to their gods, their music, songs and dance. Chaudhuri's work also covers the ways in which people reply and intermingle with one another, their conversations which sometimes don't even have any agenda in them, their thoughts, their views

about various things, in short, the everyday quotidian routine of life. Such small and probably unimportant details as applying mustard oil to the body of a child, their laundry process and spreading them on a clothesline after wringing them, serving and eating different varieties of food.

In the process of creating the local Bengali culture and its middle class, Amit Chaudhuri's take help from his own reminiscence, his own memory from his childhood. There is a drama, comedy, irony, in his novel. The use of local language that Chaudhuri does in his novel and how he distinguishes himself from other writers of his time as someone who focuses on his past memories of his childhood from the time that he got to spend in India, when he lived in Bombay with his parents or he visits to his uncle house in this city called Kolkata, to create something special, a novel which is unique in its own way. The use of clear or hazy individual memories or subverting local myths, legends, and folklores followed by a great number of diasporic writers and even the residential writers have started incorporating this technique. His love for the city of Calcutta and Bengal is quite evident from all his novels. All of Chaudhuri's novels *A Strange and Sublime Address*, *Afternoon Raag*, *Freedom Song*, *A New World*, and *The Immortals* consist of some kind of reference to the past experience that he has with this city of Calcutta.

A Strange and Sublime Address is set in Calcutta; Chaudhuri describes the Bengali culture through their characters. He shows Bengali culture and tradition, and by these we also see the Indian-ness and Indian Culture. According to Chaudhuri "Geographically we are divided but through culture and tradition we remain united". *A Strange and Sublime Address* is a very different kind of a novel. There is a kind of brooding stateliness about it. The tone is more secluded and sedentary and less boisterous. Even in the digressions and homely details, there are the kind of slow rhythm and a meditative quietness that strike us. This is perhaps because the novel has made up of past ruminations and present musings and blends the personal with the impersonal. When we take the novels of Amit Chaudhuri into consideration, we are indeed impressed by the range and diversity that this novelist seems to have at his command. His novels are plotless meditations wherein nothing 'happens'; pages are expended describing, in exquisite prose. Written seemingly out of life, his works are beautiful, intensely observed, yet static and inconsequential more mood pieces than novels.

Avoiding the surrealism of Rushdie, the author of *A Strange and Sublime Address* opts for a narration style where the myth, the folk, symbol, and realism form a seamless whole. The sights and sounds of Indian metropolis namely Calcutta (Old Kolkata) and Bombay (now Mumbai) come alive and they actually appear to be real to the core and are not just realistic in his novels. This commitment with reality is responsible for Amit Chaudhuri's uneasy relationship with post-modernism which represents playfulness and indeterminacy with regard to his writings and their meanings. It scrutinizes any writing which is looking to represent reality because post-modernism disbelieves in reality and magnificent narratives. Chaudhuri is deeply pre-occupied with emotions and aesthetics and above all with 'real people'. For him, "text" is the life and the most vital source of renewing the perceptions of reality is "language". According to Chaudhuri, Presence and Fullness are the soul of Indian literature (which comprises of both local as well as international literature) including, of course, Indian English literature too. As such Chaudhuri relates himself to the rich cultural and literary traditions of India and derives emotional fullness and sustenance. He loves sounds for the value of suggestiveness.

Chaudhuri's writings thus carry in their unobtrusive representation an impending simplicity and lyricism. Every minute detail in Chaudhuri's novels has its proper place and is linked with the world-views of the central character which ultimately are presented by counter views as well. The author's originality both in its choice of theme and techniques has enabled him to sculpt a unique place for him in the contemporary Indian English literature. Amit Chaudhuri's luminously intelligent novels thus appropriate a literary tradition that is both his and not his, thereby placing his writing- erudite and playful as it is - on the map of modernism.

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