



REGIONAL SENSIBILITY IN THE NOVELS OF AMIT CHAUDHURI

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ABSTRACT

Indian English fiction has witnessed a remarkable change in the last three decades. A good number of new novelists, hailed from multiple professions, produced a good body of literature with their solid contribution. They have presented the problems of own professions, keeping their region and culture as background, besides highlighting social problems. They are primarily the victims of nostalgia who never forgot and ran away from their roots, region, and culture. Outstanding among the novelists of new generation is Amit Chaudhuri, a young, delightful, and brilliant contemporary writer who acclaimed worldwide for his novel. He explored the alternative tradition in the modern society in his novels. The objective of the present paper is to make a brief study on the writings of Amit Chaudhuri's seven novels – A Strange and Sublime Address, Afternoon Raag, Freedom Song, A New World, The Immortals, Odysseus Abroad, and Friend of My Youth – which provide new perspectives on the theoretical models of the western and the Indian domesticity. It also aims to analyze how the novels reflect the Indian values and regional sensibility.

Keywords: Indian English Fiction, nostalgia, Amit Chaudhuri, New perspectives

INTRODUCTION

The second half of twentieth century witnessed a large scale proliferation of fiction-history interface across continents and cultures. The modern novelist is especially concerned with his perception of what constitutes his identity, his country, his community, and his position in the larger matrix. Since 1981, when Salman Rushdie won the Booker Prize, writers of Indian origin, whether staying in India or abroad, have produced nearly three-hundred novels and

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drew the attention of literary world. These new novelists belong to different professions such as teachers (Manju Kapur), Indian Civil Servants (Upamanyu Chatterjee and Keki N. Daruwalla), politicians (Shashi Tharoor), journalists (Aravind Adiga), musicians (Amit Chaudhuri), computer professionals, and management executives (Chetan Bhagat), etc. They have presented the problems of own professions, keeping their region and culture as background, besides highlighting social problems. They are primarily the victims of nostalgia who never forgot and ran away from their roots, region, and culture. Outstanding among the novelists of new generation is Amit Chaudhuri, who explored the alternative tradition in the modern society in his novels. M.K. Naik remarks that Chaudhuri is “grouped under the capacious umbrella of regional fiction ... as the sights and sounds of Calcutta do come to life in *his* novels.”¹

Amit Chaudhuri (May 15, 1962) is a novelist, poet, essayist, literary critic, editor, vocalist, and music composer. He was born in Calcutta (now Kolkata) to Nages Chandra Chaudhuri, the first Indian CEO, and Bijoya Chaudhuri, a highly acclaimed singer. He studied at the Cathedral and John Connon School, Bombay (now Mumbai). He received his degree from University College, London. He worked on D.H. Lawrence for his doctoral dissertation at Balliol College, Oxford, and won the degree. He is currently teaching Creative Writing at University of East Anglia and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, United Kingdom.

Chaudhuri has written seven novels which include *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991), *Afternoon Raag* (1993), *Freedom Song* (1998), *A New World* (2000), *The Immortals* (2009), *Odysseus Abroad* (2014), and *Friend of My Youth* (2017). He is the author of two non-fictions namely *Calcutta: Two Years in the City* (2013) and *Telling Tales* (2013). His other works include *Real Time: Stories and a Reminiscence* (2002), a book of short stories, *D.H. Lawrence and ‘Difference’: Postcoloniality and the Poetry of the Present* (2003), a ‘classic’ and ‘truly groundbreaking’ study of D.H. Lawrence’s poetry by Terry Eagleton, *St. Cyril Road and other Poems* (2005), an anthology of poems, *Clearing a Space: Reflections on India, Literature and Culture* (2008), an influential book of critical essays, and *On Tagore* (2012), a collection of essays on Rabindranath Tagore. Besides the above said, he has edited two books entitled *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature* (2001) and *Memory’s Gold: Writings on Calcutta* (2008). Now, he began writing “a series for *The Paris Review* titled *The Moment* from January 2018.”² He has won the Commonwealth Writers Prize, the Betty Trask Award in 1991 for *A Strange and Sublime Address*, Encore Award and Southern Arts Literature Prize in 1994 for *Afternoon Raag*, Los Angeles Times Book Prize in 1999 for *Freedom Song*, Sahitya Akademi Award in 2002 for *A New World*, and Rabindra Puraskar in 2012 for *On Tagore*. He is also awarded the first Infosys Prize in the Humanities in 2013 for his outstanding contribution to literary studies.



Amit Chaudhuri, like Keki N. Daruwalla who wrote about Northern India, writes novels about Calcutta and Bombay, the places where he was born and brought up. He feels that a writer should pay attention and write about contemporary life. His works, developed from observation of people and communities, are most autobiographical in the sense of being about his life, his family, servants, and those he and his family know. They are based on details, attention to places, buildings, rooms, manners, dress, language and behaviour, in contrast to ideas of what Indian life is like. They, embedding ordinary lives in actual places, sights, sounds, colours, food, and customs, produce a rich density of social notion of a community.

Chaudhuri is a master of the miniature, the almost motionless, the unadventurous life, the absence of vulgar posturing, and attention-seeking. His writing is not about ideas of colonial or postcolonial India, but about discrete areas, about parts rather than the assumed whole. Ideologies are not part of his sensibility. His writing seems produced by someone for whom the life of the imagination is a substitute for feeling at home and being rooted in a community. He uses a new form and technique which is different from other writers.

After holding teaching and research positions at Oxford and Cambridge Universities, Chaudhuri settled in Calcutta in 1999 after 16 years of stay in England. Rejecting western postmodern and postcolonial theories about the Indian novel that emphasize cultural conflict, privilege fancy, and claim that mass or popular culture is more significant than high culture, he claims of a Bengali tradition of modernism, including Tagore, with which he associates himself. His contribution to the Indian English novel is note-worthy. Thus, the objective of the present paper is to make a study of his seven novels which contribute much to the modern Indian English literature in this post-modern era.

Amit Chaudhuri's first novel *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991) is "an impressionistic account of a Bombay-bred Bengali boy's visit to Calcutta during vacation."³ Sandeep, the protagonist of the novel, is a ten-year old boy who lives with his parents in a Bombay high-rise apartment, makes two long visits to his extended family in Calcutta. He attends English language schools, speaks English as his first language. He has no religious beliefs and is lonely. He wants to become a writer as his interest lies in identifying the sounds and meanings of words. His father is chauffeured in a good car paid by the British company. The boy's mother was at first bored and feels lonely living in Bombay, but takes musical lessons later. Every year during the summer vacation, Sandeep comes to Calcutta with his mother and stays at the house of his maternal uncle, Chhotomama. Sandeep and his mother seem happier and more occupied when visiting with Chhotomama's family in Calcutta. He enjoys his new world with a feeling of amazement. He spends most of the time with his two cousins and with the women in the family.



The novella tells of two visits of Sandeep, the first is to the house of his maternal uncle and the other is his back to family in Calcutta. The story seems to be without plot, but gives a detailed description of people, events, things, places, food, sights, social, and religious customs, during two visits. The world of the children, with their fantasies, preoccupations and lack of knowledge, is contrasted to the world of adults, adult illnesses, national history, and politics. With dexterous skill, Chaudhuri recreates in the novel simple pleasures of childhood bathing, eating, and also sleeping. The writer successfully transforms this world of children into a universal vision. The narration moves with spatially and temporarily. The novel does not merely present a story but rather it makes us live and share an actual experience with minute details of time and place. Here, Bombay figures as the symbol of disorienting modernity to be contrasted with Calcutta.

There seems to be an autobiographical strain in this novel. The story is Chaudhuri's own portrait of an artist as a young man, his version of a novel about family life and growing up. The life in the city of Bombay is more organized, mechanical, and lonely. In contrast, the city of Calcutta is marked by a lively and vigorous local cultures and a sense of community-life, togetherness.

Chaudhuri's second novel *Afternoon Raag* (1993) is set in England, Bombay, and Calcutta. It is about the life and emotions of an Indian student and three 'Asian friends' at Oxford University. The story moves back and forth between Oxford, where the student studies and Bombay, where his parents live. The novel deals with the experiences and impressions of the student who studies English literature at the University of Oxford. Chaudhuri recreates the state of a young man coming to terms with loneliness, nostalgia, and alienation. Sharma, the student often returns in his thoughts to his family home in Bombay and later to Calcutta. He straddles the two worlds literally – on his trips back and forth – and more importantly imaginatively. The new surroundings of the Oxford Campus, as well as the house in Bombay to which the narrator's parents have moved, prompt a range of sensual reaction. Thus, his sojourn at the university, and his childhood memories of Bombay and Calcutta form the staple of the book.

The novel is titled as *Afternoon Raag*. The 'raag' means a piece of classical Indian music. Chaudhuri calls a 'raga,' "the melodic progression of the ordered, and systematized notes of a melody."⁴ Here, afternoon 'raag' is played just before the evening and the whole novel gradually unfolds the narrator's love for music and his love for the two girls, Shehnaz and Mandira. Shehnaz, thin, small-breasted, vegetarian postgraduate, is divorced and the student of Oxford University. She meets Sharma when she is at the end of an affair. Mandira, an undergraduate, is depressive, avoids taking her exams, moves off campus, works part-time in



the covered market. But eventually takes her exams, and returns home to her family, possibly for an arranged marriage.

The novel appears to be autobiographical and many of the revelations about the main character correspond to what Chaudhuri has alluded to in his life and that of his family. The musical title is significant. The novel is prefaced by a poem dedicated to his mother's music teacher, Pandit Govind Prasad Jaipurwale (1941-1988), presumably the model for the person in his novel.

Sharma, is not like many Indians who go to Oxford and change their style of living. He has generous openness and is adept at picking English customs and making English friends. He doesn't betray that he feels homesick or alienated. The narrator is fond of Sharma's company but he does not allow him to disrupt his world of wistful longing, loneliness, and laughter.

Freedom Song (1998), Chaudhuri's third novel, is set in Calcutta during the Winter of 1993 against the backdrop of social, religious, and economic unrest, especially the growing political tension between Hindus and Muslims. The novel revolves around the lives and reminiscences of two middle-class families – Khuku and her husband Shib, a couple in their sixties, and Khuku's younger, less prosperous brother Bhola and his wife Abha. Bhola's family lives in a house on Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar road with his three children – Bhaskar, Manik, and Piyu.

Khuku lives with her husband Shib, and her friend Mimi. Despite its title, the story is no more about politics, but it is about romantic love. Khuku, the mother in one household, is chiefly irritated with the Muslims because their call to worship wakes her up too early every morning. Her husband, a retired businessman, has been hired to cure a dull candy factory that doesn't particularly want to be cured. Across town, Khuku's brother, Bhola worries about his son, Bhaskar's affiliations with the communist party, but only because they may affect his ever-so-gradually coalescing marriage prospects. The important things that make up the novel are the individual, the trajectories of their lives, the situations, the moment that are part of their indelible memories and desires and the web of their social life, its copulations, and complexities. The important characters who figure in the world of this novel are Khuku and Shib, Bhola and his wife Abha, Mimi and Bhaskar and his nephew, Mohit, son of Ruti and a few other relations and acquaintances. So, one can easily say that it is almost a family saga. The novel, perhaps been neatly summed up by the narrator who says "They woke, slept, talked. They eked out the days with inconsequential chatter."⁵ The novel can be compared with Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* as both use a family's quest as a way to examine society and its history.



Cast in the same mould, Chaudhuri's fourth novel *A New World* (2000) is a study of the decay of Calcutta and of the city's Bengali Brahmin elite as represented by the Chatterjees. It is the story of Jayojit, the protagonist, who is a third-world cosmopolitan working in America as a successful writer, economist, and university Professor. He travels back from America to his native land Calcutta with his son Vikram alias Bonny after taking divorce from his Bengali wife, Amala and spends summer holidays with his parents in Calcutta. During the stay of four months, in India, father and son reestablish themselves in the city. There are also flashback of his broken marriage and his parents' abortive attempt to arrange a second marriage for him with a Bengali divorcee. He had met her on his previous visit, but they had got nowhere. She had backed out. But one notices a sense of the returning migrant's disorientation within a landscape that is both familiar as well as strange. Behind him, in America, there is a broken relationship which he made him depressed and alienated. However, he goes back to America, the land of wealth and opportunity, which might cure him. Jayojit leaves his father because he seemed to be looking not so much for a wife as a governess for his son. Thus, Chaudhuri magically makes the novel virtually plot-free story and a compelling drama of alienation and resignation.

Chaudhuri's fifth novel *The Immortals* (2009) is set in Bombay in the 1980s. It is highly lyrical. Music of the Indian classical tradition runs throughout the novel. It is a narrative of two families – one luxuriating in a new world of corporate affluence and the other is getting by on the old world of musical tradition. Together, they are joined by a common, day-to-day pursuit of music. The novel represents an interlocking chain of contrasts between two temperamentally opposite protagonists Nirmalya Sengupta and Shyam Lal. Mallika Sengupta, the central character of the novel, married to Apurva Sengupta, chief executive of a large corporation, and their son is Nirmalya. The other pole of the narrative concerns itself with Shyamji, musician and tutor who instructs Mallika and then Nirmalya in the intricacies of Indian classical music. He earns a lot of money by indulging wealthy ladies from affluent families in the pursuit of celebrity. The new relationship as a student and teacher has unexpected and lasting consequences in the lives of both the protagonists. While Shyamji balances his tutorial duties, Nirmalya rebels, declaring pop music as nonsense and demands education in India's classical tradition. Nirmalya who has inherited his mother's love of music eventually leaves his homeland to study philosophy abroad. As the plot of the novel develops, one sees how the two families try to challenge and change each other and how student and teacher try to influence each other by their different versions of the world, and what place music holds in that world. The scenes of characters practising in private are subtly thrilling. The novel argues about the role of music in east and west, in the marketplace and in society. The novel's perfectly



“judged final page performs an analogous return, like the reverberation of a plucked string dissolving gradually into air.”⁶

Chaudhuri’s love of music can be clearly visualized in *The Immortals*. He puts high premium on the music by treating it as a means to achieve sublimity and immortality. He is personally interested in North Indian classical music and has a few albums to his credit. Though his love of music is intense, he doesn’t claim to be a professional. The ironical treatment of Nirmalya brings to mind James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Youngman*.

Odysseus Abroad (2014) is the sixth novel of Amit Chaudhuri. It is a bold experiment in modern fiction. Following the technique of stream of consciousness, it unfolds over the course of a single warm July day in London in 1985. It is an engrossing tale of homesickness and belonging, exile, loneliness, frustration, fear, and failure. Ananda, the protagonist lives in London lonely. He is a young Indian who is in his early twenties. He studies B.A. in English literature. He has the luxury to live in a tiny apartment of his own. His parents visit him often. His mother, Uma, stays in London the most. She cooks all his favourites rich flavoured food. Even though Ananda is an adult, he feels safer and more at ease when his mother is with him. He no longer has to face all the unknown a loneliness. He feels comfort at home with his mother. His maternal uncle, Rangamama or Radhesh, 50-something, unmarried (a virgin, even), wealthy, simultaneously generous and parsimonious, lives in London not far away from him. They constantly meet and go to Indian restaurants and cafes. All of that is on the surface. In reality Ananda is desperate to go back. In London, everything is unfamiliar and hostile. He thinks about music and constantly practices raags to the displeasure of his neighbours. In this way, he feels closely to his everyday routine in India. His uncle doesn’t share his sentiments and he doesn’t sympathize towards Anand’s outpourings of homesickness. He claimed that he never felt homesick himself. The novel, thus, works out a parody of Homer’s *Odysseus* and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, representing Ananda and his uncle Radhesh as modern prototypes of Telemachus and Odysseus.

Friend of My Youth (2017), a ‘mini-masterpiece’ by the *Financial Times*, is Chaudhuri’s seventh and the most recent novel. It is part novel and part manifesto. It slips chronically into Bombay and overdoses on its parks, its buildings, colleges, and clubs. It presents itself as a work of fiction about friendship, the experiences of youth and the city of Bombay. Vaishna Roy aptly says that

“Amit Chaudhuri uses Bombay and childhood friend as the backdrop upon which to map his mind and memory.”⁷



The novel opens with Amit Chaudhuri, the narrator, who visits Bombay, a city where he grew up, for a book tour. He, like Chaudhuri, was born in Bombay but grew up in Kolkata. He sends messages to his friends, or people who were once friends, to invite them to a reading he is giving. Having come to Bombay he wants to meet his only surviving school friend, Ramu Reddy, with whom he spoke at the end of 2008 when both of them were in sixth class. It was the time when city was running amok with terrorists and commandoes. Ramu is a charming but unreliable chancer who is addicted to heroin. His addition has sent him to rehab in Alibagh. The narrator travels through the city, past the familiar and the unfamiliar. He also travels back and forth in time. In the end, Amit remembers the ebb and flow of his friendship with Ramu. Thus, the novel explores the boundary between 'living' and 'writing'. Though, Amit resembles the author himself and share the same name, both are not one. Nadeem Aslam comments thus:

This book is a hymn to a city, to our present and our past. Like an Indian Proust, he shows us the enchantments and powers of memory. To read Amit Chaudhuri is to discover that one's heart is beating at a gentler, more profound pace. In today's noisy world, his words provide a home wherein we can contemplate the essential things in life.⁸

Chaudhuri's writings don't find real plots or particular stories to tell his readers. In spite they describe day-to-day living and experiences in a beautiful way. One can find minute details of a house or a typical day. They glimpse into his characters' everyday mundane life that is disguised behind beautiful prose. For him, the protagonist is only an element in a story whereas evening, room, wall, smoke, care, are other possible ones. He has the unusual gift of turning every little mundane details of daily life into poetic beauty. His novels also are abounding in pictorial quality. He paints places and characters in his novels with his beautiful vibrant and complex fabric of language. He is an expert in creating images. He describes sounds and their pattern. He has an acute ear for sound effects probably due to his training and accomplishments as a musician. He depicts the ordinary, mundane, daily activities of people especially the middle-class people / families. His writings deal with issues neither related to the destiny of nations nor with the matters of heart and caste. Culture contrast is never far removed from Chaudhuri's fiction. This unique style distinguishes Chaudhuri from a great many other Indian English novelist. His writings firmly place him in the frontline of contemporary Indian writing in English.

Delicate, lyrical, elegant, sensitive, evocative, charming, and enchanting are some of the adjectives which reviewers, both Indian and Western, have used in praise of Chaudhuri.⁹



Chaudhuri's writing reveals a desire for a fixed identity as a Calcutta Bengali and Indian classical musician, though his life and practice is at odds with such fixity. He appears to be trying to create a space for himself, a home through his writing. His prose is beautiful and controlled in the novel. It is the best portrait of India today.

Thus, Chaudhuri's novels provide new perspectives on the theoretical models of the western and the Indian domesticity. In other words, they reflect the Indian values and Bengali sensibility. To conclude, one may tune with Amartya Sen, Noble Prize winner and jury chair of the first Infosys prize for the Humanities, who in his congratulatory address said:

He (Chaudhuri) is of course a remarkable intellectual with a great record of literary writing showing a level of sensibility as well as a kind of quiet humanity which is quite rare.¹⁰

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