



SOCIO-CULTURAL ASPECTS OF LIFE: A STUDY OF AMIT CHAUDHURI'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Amit Chaudhuri is a versatile writer of contemporary Indian English Literature. He is a poet, novelist, essayist and literary critic and also a good singer. He is interested in Indian classical music and songs. He has been acclaimed worldwide for his love of Indian classical music and novels: A Strange and Sublime Address (1991), Afternoon Raag (1993), Freedom Song (1898), A New World (2002) and The Immortals (2009). He has made a mark in the pantheon of contemporary Indian writers in English. His writings are conspicuous, striking and vibrating touch the heart of his readers. His works reflect the Indian values and Bengali sensibility, simplicity and distinctiveness of language which speak to the reader and pave a ground for them to move forward. Chaudhuri's controlled writing, which is very lyrical, firmly places him in the frontline of contemporary Indian Writing in English.

KEYWORDS: Culture, Indian English Literature, Amit Chaudhuri and Indian classical music.

It is an open fact that in the postmodern era, the individual has become everything, and people extend greater importance to individuality. The personal being political as the password of contemporary cultural milieu, it has become a tendency of all post-colonial writers to highlight their cultures and region of the particular areas sometimes culminating into glocalization. Amit Chaudhuri belongs to this category of writers and depicts Bengali Culture and its people in his novels.

Amit Chaudhuri's works show the influence of a particular space on the characters and events of his novels. He describes the hills, the forests, the roads, the buildings, the architecture, the towns and the countryside of his region and gives maximum exposure to them. It has been used as a background of his works. The region is much more than a mere setting or background of his works. It plays an important role in the development of the story and characterization. The region participates in the works of Chaudhuri with all its aspects: nature, culture, legends, customs, conventions, superstitions, topography, and environment. He describes farmers, businessmen, labourers, fairs, market places, river-bridges and sea, the backwardness and superstitions of the local people, rustic songs and dances and Bengali dishes etc. all with a wide knowledge and acute feeling because he has known them intimately.

Amit Chaudhuri represents both a synthesis of and a tension between his Bengali and postmodern sensibility. His writings serve as a wonderful key to understanding the vitality and specificity of Indian modernity and of modern transformation of Indian civilization. His works reflect the Indian values coated in Bengali sensibility. His works show the influence of a particular space on the characters and events of his novels. Amit Chaudhuri's novels represent different aspects of home and domestic life. The domestic settings of his novels illustrate the material history of the Indian home and associated with religious, social



and cultural practices, and show how these are adopted and reworked by the protagonists. Similarly, in the depiction of domestic life, gender roles and social relations in the household, Chaudhuri's novels provide a new perspective on the theoretical models of the Western and the Indian domesticity.

It is not surprising that much of Amit Chaudhuri's novels are a celebration of local cultures and subjectivities. His uniqueness as a writer, however, rests largely on the fact that his most sensitive evocation of locality are done through an exclusive focus on the ordinary and the quotidian in fragmented, episodic form, never woven into holistic narrative, much less one about the development of the modern India. Locality and commonplace, in fact, construct themselves as mutual preconditions in his novels. This paper is an attempt to trace the elements of socio-cultural aspect of life in Chaudhuri's novels.

Chaudhuri thematized the socio-cultural identity in his novels. He compromised with the colonial reality and has realized that perhaps he cannot excuse from it. However, his aim is recognizing at native culture by projecting it positively. It is known fact that a works of art carry the evidence of the social and cultural practices of the community in its evolutionary history and play an obvious social role by servicing as a selective memory of traditions and ideals. Literature is one avenue of cultural substance and its modern-day significance lies in its ability to assume an anxiously hybrid realm where private interests assume public significance.

A study of Chaudhuri's novels explores the disconnected fragments of the commonplace and mundane life. His novels are, in fact, a continual reminder of everyday life. Chaudhuri's first novel, *A strange and Sublime Address* captures middle class Kolkata, a city of industrial and economic stagnation but with the unique cultural flavor, seen through the eyes of the twelve-year old protagonist, Sandeep, who comes to the city from Mumbai to spend his summer vacation in the household of his maternal uncle.

The conflict of worldviews mentioned above is here crystallized in the scene where a younger relative, during a social visit, tries to touch the elder's feet as a traditional gesture of respect, but the latter reposes to let him do so. Not only is the social ritual of touching an elder's feet constructed as a quotidian custom within the given culture, the predictability and the ubiquity of this behavioral conflict at this point in social history clearly helps to configure a situation as this as something of a cultural cliché. And yet it is this cliché that not only rules together strands of banality and locality as contingent upon one another, but also provides valuable cultural knowledge about a larger ideological conflict that problematizes the demarcation of private and public, notwithstanding its occurrence within the realm of the domestic. Larger ideological historical and cultural conflict's are banalized and domesticated within the recurring quotidian spaces of home and private lives, and their significance in no less for that but rather but much more.

Moreover, Chaudhuri is less interested in such narrative than his interest in peculiar regional variations. In another situation in the same novel, an adult comes across three young boys occupied in role-playing which they are acting out the pretend game of freedom fighters. This relative the maternal uncle of the novels twelve-year old protagonist Sandeep is suddenly provoked at Sandeep's game. Such loaded trivialities establish the significances of everyday practices often pushed into the margins of cultural knowledge production. The



incident of the role-playing game, moreover, illustrates the mutually interdependent relationship between everyday life and the configuration of locality in the way dailyness is embedded here in the play be local culture, knowledge and subjectivities.

Chhotomama, youngest maternal uncle of the novel's young protagonist Sandeep in *A Strange and Sublime Address*, here as in rest of the novel is a good example of a local subject, a concept that is crucial both to the tradition of fiction Chaudhuri for grounds and his theoretical criticism of the national narratives. Chhotomama's subjectivity here organizes itself through its interpellation into regional political ideologies. The comical and strange behavior of Chhotomama, the uncle of Sandeep, we have a very realistic crystallization of this political regionalism. Chaudhuri's fiction, however, places an almost exclusive emphasis on such spaces marginalized by dominant historiographies, not as mirrors to such historiographies. Such spaces in fact constitute the crucial site of the production and cultivation of the quotidian in his fiction, through which the tangible texture of locality are woven.

However, Chaudhuri's novels offer a non-moral, post-independence problematisation of what the subaltern historiographer. It is very appropriate to quote here Partha Chatterjee as he had identified the primary of the "inner domain" of national culture over the "outer domain" in the context of anti-colonial nationalism of 19th century Bengal—an argument that on either on its postcolonial end, is a powerful rebuttal of the Jamesonian claim of the primary of collective political culture in the third narrative world. Chaudhuri's novels offer us on fictional planes, a valuable alternative paradigm for the ethical political and aesthetic apprehension of some of the most intricate relationships between the public and private, the humdrum and the historically valorized in the cultural realities of post-independence India.

Chaudhuri's second novel *Afternoon Raag* is a series of sketches about the life of an Indian graduate student in England, moving back and forth between Oxford, where he studies and Mumbai, where his parents live. The novel deals with the experiences and impressions of a young Indian student of English Literature at the University of Oxford. Chaudhuri recreates the state of mind of a young man coming to terms with loneliness, nostalgia and alienation. A *raag* is a piece of classical Indian music which plays around a set of specific intervals to create a particular mood. Here the mood recreated is one of being adrift in a unique situation, enjoying a very special phase of life between childhood and adult life, devoted to ephemeral, yet significant relationships and aesthetic pursuits.

The ways in which representations of the ordinary and the dramatic, the local and the global, are placed in an almost dialectical relation with each other is heightened not only by the 'foreignness' of this novel's main locale, but also through subdued reminders that this 'foreignness' has a special familiarity in individual and collective cultural histories relevant to the protagonist's character. It also reminds us that definition of local are never absolute, just the way commonplace, even though often conceptualized universally, can only be concretely apprehended to a local level. Such is how disparate forms coexistence even merges in the Oxford room of another student.

The narrator of the novel physically situated in Oxford, often returns in his thoughts to his family home in Bombay and, later, Calcutta. Literally he struggles in the two worlds—on his trips back and forth—and more significantly, imaginatively. In an interview with



Sumana R.Ghosh, Chaudhuri accepts, “I’m more interested in that kind of movement between two different worlds, this inner and outer, sometimes two incompatible cultural worlds which can be signified by the use of *shajana* tree and Colgate toothpaste in the same sentence. So, that what I find has the movement of narrative” (161). The home is present in the novels in its plural proportions, as references to sights, smells, sounds, essence and collective customs make clear. So far Chaudhuri is most sensitive to the obscure, marginal and banal elements of daily existence.

However, Chaudhuri’s celebration of duality of ordinary and the grand, the local and the distant, the crucial and the marginal not only helps to put each other in perspective, but also critically defines the spirit and ethos of student life-and in a larger way, the meaning of the intellectual pursuit that often works with such apparently contradictory life-worlds what remains understand.

Amit Chaudhuri’s third novel, *Freedom Song*, is set in Calcutta during the winter of 1992-93 against a backdrop of growing political tension between Hindu and Muslim. The child’s Calcutta is still present but has been changed by two decades of communist rule and political violence across the country. *Song* and *raag* are much more than lyrical titles of his books. They are an integral part of the writer’s life as he is an accomplished Hindustani musician who has given concerts in major Indian metros

The novel concerns two related households in Calcutta in 1993, going about their domestic business against a distant backdrop of civil unrest. Despite its title, the story is no more about politics than *Afternoon Raag* is about romantic love. Khuku, the mother in one household, is chiefly irritated with the Muslims because their call to worship wakes her up so 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 worries about his son’s affiliations with the Communist Party, but only because they may affect his ever-so-gradually coalescing marriage prospects.

Chaudhuri would talk of India, Bengal and Calcutta in the same breath as if they meant the same thing. Similarly, while he is averse to any pan-Indian culture, he would talk of the culture of Calcutta and by implication; suggest the culture of Calcutta and India. For example, he says about *Freedom Song*, “I really think of it as an extended poem about the end of certain phase in Calcutta, in Bengali culture, and in Indian culture.” (*On Belonging* 50)

The entire action of *Freedom Song*, which deals with the middle class life in Calcutta, has perhaps been neatly summed up in these words of narrator, “They woke, slept, and talked. They eked out the days with inconsequential chatter.” (56)

Chaudhuri also goes on to add that Bengali culture is a profoundly middle-class culture. So you have a society of mainly old people and children, the people who have stayed on are like Bhaskar in *Freedom Song*, who has joined the Communist Party because he is no good for anything else. So the Bengal he grew up with, with its own language and its own culture, and which he considers psychologically to be his home, no longer exists.

Writer, critic and singer, Chaudhuri is a master at details, adding just right amount to illuminate a day. In his novel, *Freedom Song*, the Hindu wife wakes up to the Muezzin’s call, slightly annoyed when she finds the children awake because of the sound that “They are going too far. It isn’t really Indian, they sound like Bedonins.” In her choice of the word



“They”, Chaudhuri reveals the gap that runs through India. *Freedom Song* appeared when The Hindu-Muslim relations were at their most fragile since India’s Independence in 1947.

His fourth novel, *A New World*, won Sahitya Akademi Award in 2003. It is the narrative of Jayojit Chatterjee, a divorced writer living in America, who returns to his parents’ home in Calcutta with his son Vikram (Bonny) for summer break. His elderly parents are first unable to comprehend the collapse of his marriage. What hurts Jayojit is the shrinking space that Bengali culture carries with itself and the changing face of the metropolis. Bengali and common place things like hurry to catch the train, noise in the railway, canteen and announcement in the departure.

This story is however not just about Jayojit, but is also about the marriage of his parents, and about Bengali life in hot, busy Calcutta. Chaudhuri sets within the four walls of a small flat a contrasting image of marriage: a failed modern day marriage, and an apparently successful, if extremely traditional marriage where the positions of roles are unquestioned and accepted by both husband and wife. Chaudhuri writes with great ease about Calcutta, his city of birth. His description of daily life is vivid and his treatment of the story is filled with a subtle tenderness.

The narrative is at times quite slow, but is precise in capturing precious moments of emotion that appears in the relationships of Jayojit and his ex-wife Amala, and also in the more distant relationship between his father, the Admiral, and his mother. In the novel, *Freedom Song*, Chaudhuri has produced a thought – provoking, quietly passionate with strong, real characters that stay in the mind long after the last sentence.

A New World is all about relationships between parents and children. Jayojit’s parents are deftly depicted. His father is a retired Admiral of the Indian Navy. After a life of privilege, the old man and his wife now have to fend for themselves and count every penny of their dwindling savings. The retired Admiral has to take the bus to the bank because he can no longer afford a driver for his battered old car. But he is proud, when Jayojit wants to buy a washing machine for his mother, his father objects. His mother is disappointed, but she can’t go against her husband. It’s a traditional Indian marriage. Jayojit’s father doesn’t even always speak to his wife though they clearly depend on each other.

One is struck by how reticent and under-constructive the whole family is. Jayojit’s mother affectionately teases her grandson and tries to pamper him and her husband and son with food, but apart from that there is no overt show of love and affection. Even when Jayojit’s parents want him to extend his stay and spend a few more days with them, they ask if he can postpone his return to America rather than request him to stay on.

Jayojit Chatterjee, more promising of the two sons of Admiral Anand and Ruby Chatterjee, does his B.A. in Economics from St. Stephens, wins a government scholarship to study abroad, but turns down the offer and goes to California for Graduate work in Economics. After the successful completion of his studies he teaches in a college at Claremont in Iowa. He marries a Bengali girl called Amala whose ancestors migrated from Sind and settled in Jodhpur Park. Jayojit and Amala settle down in Arlington and have a son after three years of their marriage. After the baby’s birth they lose interest in each other and their marriage breaks. Amala runs off with her gynecologist and lives with him in San Diego in Southern America. After eight years protracted legal battle both in American and Indian

courts the couple gets a divorce and Jayojit wins custody of the child for the summer days only. Deep in the heat of April, Jayojit visits his parents living in Sunny Park Apartment in Calcutta with his eight-year-old, very American son, Vikram to spend his summer vacation and return to America in June.

A New Word, though a third person narrative, focalizes the consciousness of Jayojit and it is primarily his consciousness which helps us discover the trajectory of the new in the novel. To him, the life in a suburb of age-old metropolis Calcutta where he has gone to stay with his parents appears to be immersed in the new. The consciousness of other characters, namely that of Admiral Anand Chatterjee, his wife Sumitra Chatterjee and his grandson Vikram (Bonny), has also been explored but it has been done just to help the protagonist define and refine his perceptions about a phase of life which is new and which he has newly entered.

What the divorce of Jayojit signifies is the emergence of the new world in the novel. This, however, is not so new – divorces happened in the old world also – as the cause for the divorce which we come by deconstructing the narrative discourse but which escapes the protagonist. At the back of his mind is the ancient Indian ideal of marriage – marriage for procreation and not recreation. This is why Bonny “instead of bringing them together, actually enabled them to separate into their own spheres of desire and loneliness.” (57)

Amit Chaudhuri is in no way a feminist nor is Jayojit, who considered feminism “an intellectual plague” (168) and had once argued with a Jewish colleague, “That America had taken away the controls of the institution of marriage but replaced them with nothing else” (169). He is also aware of the boundary of feminism and, looking at the pictures of Bonny sans parents; he imagined “as if he’d been conceived in future when parents, were not only but also no longer necessary, but were no more possible” (48). All the same, Jayojit fails to understand Amala’s assertion of her sexuality and selfhood semiotically encoded in his narrative: and it is this, not divorce, which causes commotion in the seemingly stable world of Calcutta. All this and much more, so minutely and sensitively observed and recorded, are enclosed by the trajectory ‘new.’

Chaudhuri’s novels are a discourse on the ordinary and commonplace but unless he is able to show how unique the ordinary and commonplace can be, he cannot be at peace with his creative self. He does so by the use of a literary strategy peculiar to himself and uncommon among other Indian English writers. He illuminates what is wondrous in the ordinary by carefully structured expressions or images. His comparisons, which remind us of metaphysical conceits, are especially striking they are apt, suggestive and unexpected. He can transform a scene and charge it with human sensibility by the adroit employment of his words—adjectives, adverbs and verbs. Thus, Bonny’s own shirt, “dangled over him indeterminately, the age of the girl, sitting hovered anywhere between seventeen and twenty one the sound of the crickets is ancient but entirely of the present.” (73)

Amit Chaudhuri writes something new, not that no one has so far attempted to do what he has done but only a few have been as successful as he. Another distinguishing feature of Chaudhuri’s style is that he can use various registers and words from languages other than English effortlessly. His novels deal with the life of those who speak English or



Bengali and sometimes have to use Hindi. Though the novel is written in English, Chaudhuri seldom leaves us in doubt as to who speaks which language or uses which register.

Amit Chaudhuri's last novel is *The Immortals* utilizes music, foods, and clothes as a metaphor to show how trans-valuation of values is taking place in the matter-driven modern society. He builds the narrative around the *ragas* of music to show the difficulty of those artists who are struggling to find their right place in the fashion of popular art culture. While lesser writers obsess over the heat and dust, Chaudhuri charts the by-ways of the Indian soul, and thus marks in the pantheon of contemporary writers. His works reflect the Indian values coated in Bengali sensibility. Music is also a form of communication using abstract symbols to transfer meaning. Music is generally accepted for constructing realities about life and culture. It plays a vital role in constructing realities. As a metaphor for communicating, music provides a link between the values and intentional activities for understating culture. Indian classical music which blends our divine sense and discipline is an act of worship and not the scholarly show of the mastery on the techniques of *raga*. It is based on melody and rhythm, not on harmony, musical tones and intonation that are the nuts and bolts of popular music. The convention of Indian traditional music has a long history which asserts its origin in the *Vedic mantra* of Hindu temples. Its roots are spiritual and therefore, it could be divine discipline on the path of self-realization. Music is *Nada Brahma* which means "Sound is God" and for this reason it is capable of elevating human consciousness and culture to the realm of the eternal and unchanging essence of the Universe.

It is the eternal sense of Indian classical music which inspires Chaudhuri most, and his preoccupation with music can be seen in his novels such as *Freedom Song*, *Afternoon Raag*, and *The Immortals*. His 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 does not claim to be a professional. He affirms this in an interview with Sumana R. Ghosh:

Music is an important constituent of the culture or family I grew up in.... However, I discovered classical music for myself.... I've become interested in Indian Classical music as a subject.... I've become interested in music and the world of capital, music, art and the marketplace. But I have to say that I'm not conscious of the analogies between my narrative technique and Indian classical music. (176-77)

The Immortals 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. Music is the thread that ties the novel. The setting of the novel is in Bombay during the 1970s and early 1980s. Mallika Sengupta, the central character of the novel, married to a high-profile executive, has never pursued a career in music but her musical interests are more than the casual hobby of a rich woman.

Chaudhuri, himself, a composer and musician has got the grand exposition ability of the world he creates. Even a long journey on the turf of literature has never been able to diverge his interest and experience with music. This connection between music and



Chaudhuri is reflected in all his novels. It is not a mere co- incidence but a fact that his novels draw on music for cultural sustenance. Chaudhuri has grown up in an environment where music was traditionally rooted and thus inherited by him. In the beginning, his interest in the music was developed by his mother and she became the first music teacher for him. Thus, we can say music is in his blood and vein. Of course, his love for music can be seen in his writing, which is a cultural metaphor for understanding society and culture.

Cultural construct is never far removed from Chaudhuri's fiction, It is striking how often the conflicting production of such categories becomes a subject itself no. only within the culturally fractured subjectivities of diasporic characters like Sandeep Jayojit and the nameless Oxford graduate student, but also within the ostensible unity of a given culture, where the identification of the ordinary and dramatic, the families and the unfamiliar, is shown to be a historical act. In the description of Sandeep's udder's daily busy preparation before he rushes off to work, such questions arises unobtrusive head.

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