

THE KALEIDOSCOPIC INDIAN BACKDROP IN AMIT CHAUDHURI SELECTS NOVELS

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Abstract

Amit Chaudhuri' works show the influence of particular space on the characters and events of his novels. His novels represent both the physical aspects such as the design, construction and use of domestic spaces and the symbolic aspects relating to the family and the nation. His works in English revolve round the springs of the kaleidoscopic Indian backdrop by depicting the emotions, feelings, hopes, aspirations and traumas experienced by the Indian people. The kaleidoscopic backdrop of Light and powercut plays a strong part in his writing; it's very luminosity comes from his acute awareness of climate and place. The novel, *Afternoon Raag*. Like Chaudhuri's *Strange and Sublime Address* is replenished with Indian ethos which are reflected in the narrator's description of his life at Oxford and his blooming reminiscences of his childhood days at his native land. The domestic settings of novels illustrate the material history of the Indian home and associated religious, social, cultural practices. The backdrop is much more than a mere setting or background of his works. It provides new perspectives on the theoretical models of western and the Indian domesticity.

Keywords: regional sensibility, light, power cut. Sound patterns

Amit Chaudhuri is one of India's most distinctive literary figures, who incorporates Indian themes and experiences in a framework that blends Indian and western aesthetics. His works in English revolve round the springs of the kaleidoscopic Indian backdrop by depicting the emotions, feelings, hopes, aspirations and traumas experienced by the Indian people. Amit Chaudhuri presents Indian Sensibility and the Indian way of life in his unique style with the new social and cultural awareness.

Amit Chaudhuri belongs to this category of writers and depicts Bengali culture and its people in his novels. His works reflect the Indian values coated in Bengali sensibility. His novels emphasize the setting, speech, social structure and customs of his native land. They manifest not only the local colour but also an important condition affecting the temperament of the characters and their ways of thinking, feeling and interacting. Chaudhuri's works deal with the physical features, people, life, customs, habits, manners, traditions, languages and lifestyles of people of his own region. This however does not mean that Chaudhuri's work is a mere factual reporting or photographic reproduction of reality. His regional sensibility emphasizes the uniqueness and the various ways in which it is different from other localities. He depicts the cultural and moral attitude of people, their overall characters and customs and the ways of life. His writing is characterized

by the prominence of regional sensibility in his fictional oeuvre.

He can render various kinds of smell and a taste Chaudhuri possesses a unique gift for sounds and sound patterns. His novels abound in sound images. He has acute ear for sound effects probably due to his training and accomplishment as a musician. He can register all kinds of sounds. He can feel the breeze as well as the storm. Imagery in fact is an indispensable part of his writings. He is a novelist who depicts the ordinary, mundane, daily activities of people specially the middle class and by the magic of his words and language, defamiliarizes the familiar happenings of daily life.

A Strange and Sublime Address is Amit Chaudhuri's maiden novel where he makes a "Strange and Sublime" appeal to the innermost fibres of one's being with its "raptly luminous" quality. As Mandira Sen has pointed out in review:

A *Strange and Sublime Address* is Indian writing in English with a difference and alters the prevailing pattern. The novella reveals no parody or depiction of alienation or even an explanation of the mysteries of another culture to the west. It is a celebration of childhood, an authentic record written in an astonishingly luminous and lyrical prose that never loses its perfect pitch nor stumbles into sentimentality (Author at Work, 8)

The novel brims impressionistic account of a Bombay bred Bengali boy's visit to Calcutta during a vacation and can be described as Chaudhuri's best exemplification of Indian life style and the typical Indian emotions and sentiments. Though the plot of this novel like many of Chaudhuri's other novels and stories is not of any particular essence, its representation of some of the traditional Indian customs, culture, heritage and practices observed in the contemporary cosmopolitan city of Calcutta is an extremely vivid one. The novel celebrates important practices in the way of life like traditional worship, religious ceremonies, rituals and customs as significant incidents. It is the Calcutta of the Indian people whose heroism lies in living life of their own. Simultaneously, the novel also reflects upon the images of radical changes in life style, education, culture and the language of daily conversations of the new generations of Calcuttans.

The novel opens with the arrival of Sandeep to his maternal uncle Chotomama's house with his mother and father. Chaudhuri celebrates not only the simple joys of childhood, bathing, eating, sleeping and exploring the city but also how the business of living, working, coming to terms with the world of sense imposes an increasing burden on the soul. From an organized and lonely life in a flat on the 23rd floor in Bombay, Sandeep comes to Calcutta to spend his holidays at his uncle's home. Through the eyes of the 10 year old a vast kaleidoscopic backdrop emerges and even such a simple act as bathing takes on the overtones of a ritual and keen sense of nostalgia assails the readers:

After they had exhausted all their games, they had a bath. They stood naked in front of the bathroom; their clothes lay in a heap at their feet. Mamima kneaded Abhi's and Babla's bodies with mustard oil. She twisted them, took them apart, put them together; they surrendered to her as plasticence surrenders its infinite forms to child's fingers. When she rubbed an arm or leg, it appeared to detach itself from the body, with a wonderful absence of pain and come into her skilful hands, a live grotesque appendage. She would oil till it shone and then fix it with a grim satisfied smile, where it belonged. (A Strange and Sublime Address, p 4-5)

The kaleidoscopic backdrop of Light plays a strong part in his writing; it's very luminosity comes from his acute awareness of climate and place. As in Hardy's *The Woodlanders*, we can see in *A Strange and Sublime Address* the seasons as they pass, summer giving way to

rains, autumn giving way to winter, winter to spring and summer once again. He doesn't write in the manner of Kafka or Camus. The Indian experience of light of windows and doors throw open of streets spilling into house and vice-versa gives his writing a rapt luminous quality. The folk and the mythic meet and mingle in the novella. The arguments of the adults on a Sunday remind Sandeep of folk artistes:

Early twentieth century actors in some green, neglected village in Bengal, where there were no mikes and no electricity and actor had to bellow his speech melodramatically before the large village audience would hear and applaud what he was saying. One would have attired in the splendid, vibrant costumes that folk artistes wore in keeping with the dramatic excessiveness of their gestures. (A Strange and Sublime Address, p 51)

Some of them have gone to the extreme level of enquiring whether he has any chance to survive. Another woman begins to cry spreading a feeling of anxiety among waiting crowd, in response to Sandeep's father's and Shona mama's reply that he is still in danger. Children are running freely in around the hospital, roaming about the hospital lawn as they have never entered such places before. Some of them are imitating the doctors and the nurses some are peering furtively at the patients' and some have made friends with the watchman with the big moustache and long stick in his hand wearing a khaki uniform. These are some strange sights to the children who have accompanied their parents from their villages, Chaudhuri in his usual ironical tone comments: "being ill was a kind of entertainment, a communal ceremony; it involved such a lot of people" (A Strange and Sublime Address, p 121). Chotomama himself has never seen such crowd of relatives in one room three generations, all at times since his marriage or the time when he has passed B.A with a first class. This combination of joy was being together whether for a wedding or for a serious situation such as this is the special feature of Indian life style. Chaudhuri himself comments, "There was so much laughter. Yet there was grief also. There was comedy. Yet there was seriousness" (A Strange and Sublime Address, p 122).

Sandeep in the novel is accustomed to hear the blowing of horns in the traffic jam of the evening in the road near Chotomama's house in the city. Chaudhuri's use of the adjectives "Punctual", "Ceremonial" and "Glourious" for "the first traffic jam of the evening" is an instance of a mellowed irony. With the same ironical and hilarious tone

Chaudhuri brings about the problem of power cuts in India and its appalling consequences. Because of frequent power cuts Sandeep's aunt and mother lie on the bed, murmuring to each other with their bangles clinking subtly. The author's description of the scene is extremely evocative of Indian sensibility:

As they (Chotomama and the three children) came closer, they noticed that the field was full of people whom they had not been able to discern at first in the darkness: now they came slowly into focus in the moonlight, like a negative becoming clearer and clearer as it was developed in a darkroom. It was a strange scene because in spite of the number people who had congregated together, there was scarcely any noise. The shadowiness of the place made them speak in low voices, as if they were in a theatre or auditorium where the lights had been dimmed meaningfully and a film or a play were just about to begin. (A Strange and Sublime Address, p 49)

Thus the irritating reality of power cuts in the city of Calcutta is made something dreamy here. It is as if the evening power cuts in the city has a conjuring power to draw all the people of the city from their houses to a moonlit-maiden for an evening walk, casual interaction and generous gossip. The maiden here is almost an epitome of the whole country of India completely transformed by the magical spell of an evening power cut. The author's use of capital letters in the words "POWER-CUT" denotes his satires.

The novel, *Afternoon Raag*, like Chaudhuri's *Strange and Sublime Address* is replenished with Indian ethos which are reflected in the narrator's description of his life at Oxford and his blooming reminiscences of his childhood days at his native land. As is clear from the title and the poem in the memory of Pandit Govind Jaipurwale as a prologue, the novel is about an *Afternoon Raag*. But the *Afternoon Raag* rather than referring to any particular raag sung at the afternoon time particularly in India. The writer calls a raag, "the melodic progression of the order and systematized notes of melody" (*Afternoon Raag*, p 107). It unfolds itself through "a slow evasive introduction in which the notes are related to each other by curving glissandos or meends" (*Afternoon Raag*, p 29). It is also a manifestation of the mental states of person caused by his interiorized experiences. The complex melodic leaps and falls and adventurous rhythmic voyages of the singer are an integral part of it and are in perfect harmony with the mental state that is being expressed. According to Chaudhuri, it is usually rooted in homeland:

Each raag was once a folk melody, a regional air sung, with tiny variations. When a Rajasthani sings *Maand* or a Punjabi sings *Sindhi Bhairavi*, he returns to his homeland, which for him is a certain landscape influenced by seasons a certain style of dressing and speaking, a web of interrelationships and festive occasions (*Afternoon Raag*, p 107).

Thus, when Chaudhuri hears the raag *Maand*, he remembers his guru, his brother and his brother-in-law *Sohanlal* for it bears the characteristics, the stamp and the life of their region. He remembers their faces, their language, the colour of their skin; the cotton kurthas they wear for these are all set and have their meaning against the same landscape.

The novel zooms in and out of the protagonist's life at Oxford and at his homeland. The novel also talks of with a greater degree of involvement about Hindustani music which provides the title to the book and there is a sense of loss at the death of the music teacher. As Nilufer E. Bharucha has pointed out in a review:

Afternoon Raag is Chaudhuri's second novel and is in a way as philosophical and soothing as *Metha's* text. More than the thematic appeal, it is the formal structure which makes this book very appealing. It opens gently, softly, like the *alaap* of a raag then meanders between peoples, places and cultures, gradually building an edifice of light and sound and then almost unnoticed comes to an end. Yet like a raag it is ever open and never complete (*The Floodgates are open: Recent Fiction from the Indian Sub-continent*, P 73).

The mood which brings forth the afternoon raag is related to two principal figures in the novel, the narrator, the author persona and focalize and his guru, the source of his inspiration but the focalized in the narrative. The other figures like *Shehnaz*, *Mandiram* and *Sharma* are also focalized and exist as various rhythms of the afternoon raag. Oxford forms the urn and India Bombay, Calcutta a bit of Rajasthan and East Bengal (now in Bangladesh) forms the long neck. The raag produced by the homeland finds its resonance in the round urn which Oxfords becomes. The novel in no way is Oxford raag. It is an Indian raag Oxford only resonates with it. Oxford is only as essential as the bellows in the harmonium, the curved wooden box in the violin and the round urn in the sitar are for music. As the narrator states, his "love of song, music, pride and delight in creation" is the gift of his motherland and not Oxford, where the narrator's choices are just

"clinging to his Indianness or letting it go being nostalgic or looking forward to future" (Afternoon Raag, p 129).

When a passerby remembers Oxford, he finds students "blurred, colourful, accidental, even touching but constantly skirting the edge of his vision (Afternoon Raag, p 75). From the height of the third floor of the New Bodleian Library, Oxford appears to be "Continually strange a place that will never become familiar or old (Afternoon Raag, p 73)". Even the picture postcards of Oxford have a sense of reality that the place itself does not possess. The narrator significantly observes:

The postcards are weightless, but palpable and when one stops to look at them, they have a recognisability that one's consciousness of Oxford lacks; they seem more real than the place one has lived in (Afternoon Raag, p 77).

Amit Chaudhuri has a very sensitive ear of sounds. Afternoon Raag is replete with sounds often musical and sometimes non-musical, which have been rendered discriminatingly. This is how he describes various sounds in the undergraduate college of Shehnaz like the noise of a radio:

a knowing crowded murmur in the kitchen, the firm but almost non-physical sound of footsteps on the gravels: I had a feeling of being surrounded as on a ship or a train, by personal routines and habits that would not be know again that had their natural place in some larger more fixed habitat and the morning noise had about it, therefore the concentratedness, the temporariness and the pathos of the noise of shared travel. (Afternoon Raag, p 7)

Only a writer like Amit Chaudhuri can mystify and spiritualize ordinary morning noises in a college. The writer can evoke two different life styles Indian and English by juxtaposing two different kinds of sounds:

What was missing was the background sound of old people and children of babies and mothers of families instead one heard people running up and down the staircase of visitors approaching and knocking. (Afternoon Raag, p 14)

The writer's sensitivity to sounds can be discerned through his sensibility of various ways in which English is spoken: Bombay English, Bengali English that his mother spoke, Sharma's English and the English spoken by people living on the Cowley Road who drop "consonants and vowels, turning the language like meat inside their mouths" (Afternoon Raag, p 93).

Chaudhuri describe the boiling of tea thus:

Water begins to boil in the kettle; it starts as a private secluded sound, pure as rain and grows to a steady, solipsistic bubbling. (Afternoon Raag, p 45)

Even a simple thing like the boiling of water blends with the larger mystery of nature suggested by "private secluded sound" and "pure as a rain" and gets humanized by the adjective "solipsistic." Such simple things render the writer's of his homeland. He is also capable of giving unexpected turn, almost metaphysical, reminiscent of Donne, to his analogies Describing the curly hair of the narrator's mother he writes:

It falls in long black strands, but each strand has a gentle, complicated undulation travelling through it like a mild electric shock or thrill, that gives it a life of its own; it is usually analogous to a tremolo on a musical notes. (Afternoon Raag, p 16)

Thus a discussion of Amit Chaudhuri's works in the main analysis shows how the notion of regional sensibility informs his works, his overall ethos and moral attachment towards the Bengali people and their culture is very outstanding. In the postmodern era individual has become the most important phenomenon. Postmodern authors are trying to highlight their particular region and culture even though they are cosmopolitan wanderers.

Amit Chaudhuri confines himself to a particular region of Calcutta and Bombay and portrays the life of the Indian feelings and emotions. It is the day to day life of Indian society to which he himself belonged once: the tensions and conflicts, stress and strains in human relation of the people which he himself has experienced and hence excels in making them the basics of his works.

The novels brim with the author's stunning evocations of place and time, and his radiant descriptions and subtle explorations of the expected and surprising events of daily life; the effects of family connectedness and separation; the desires and demands of youth and age; the things and events that confirm how mysterious the world is at every moment; the hidden complexities of a fully lived inner life. From these kaleidoscope, Amit Chaudhuri shapes mesmerizing narratives, uncovering the remarkable in what might otherwise seem merely quotidian. Chaudhuri draws layer after layer of meaning from the simplest acts and events that take place in his homeland.

Thus, 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, the lanes 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, and conversations, 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.

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