

*M.Subitha

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Tamil Nadu, India.

suhirjeeva@gmail.com

**Dr. J. Uma Samundeeswari

Assistant Professor and Research Advisor

A.V.V. M. Sri Pushpam College

Poondi, Thanjavur Dt,

Tamil Nadu, India.

Illusion of Reality in Amit Chaudhuri's '*A Strange and Sublime Address*'

ABSTRACT

Amit Chaudhuri belongs to the new generations of Indian writers in English Literature. He is a poet, essayist, novelist, literary critic, musician and Classical singer. He is world widely acclaimed for his love for Indian classical music in all his novels. His novel '*A Strange and Sublime Address*' (1991) portrays the real picture of Calcutta in 1980s and also it discusses the child's view on the world of adults, whose activities are strange and amusing to them. Sandeep, a ten year old boy from Bombay observes the sights and sounds of Calcutta and every day details of events is deeply linked with child's world view juxtaposed against adults' choices and attitudes. This paper attempts to bring out the children's world of imagination and illusion in the novel *A Strange and Sublime Address*.

Key Words: amuse, sights and sounds, attitudes, imagination, illusion

In this world all human beings are caught between the world of illusion and reality, as their minds dwell upon the world of subjective, but physically exist in the world of objective reality which cannot be directly experienced or fully understood. Albert Einstein stated that 'Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one'. This suggests that people's interpretation of real world may well be an illusion and this is evident mainly through dreams

and aspirations. That which is reality for one person may be an illusion for another and this is clearly evident through many situations when an individual faces. Reality is often clouded by the concept of illusion. Our emotions and mental state also contribute to the way in which people interpret reality. It is proved to be a major impact that the way people see things and their reaction to them. Einstein most previously predicted the reality of today, that individuals sometimes find it difficult to interpret the real world from the world of illusion.

Amit Chaudhuri's first book, *A Strange and Sublime Address* (2012), portrays a handful of people from Calcutta. The novel's hero is Sandeep, a young boy from Bombay who comes to Calcutta for his summer vacation to stay in "the old house" of his maternal uncle Chottomama, his aunt Mamima and his cousins, Abhi and Babla.

In this novel, the city is being focused by the ten year old boy. The writer gives the child's point of view on the adult's conduct. The world of adult's seems strange and amusing to Sandeep and his cousins. Through the eyes of the child he turns the adult's world upside down. The world of children is full of fantasy, and they live in the world of illusion. The real world may be an illusion for them. This novel through Sandeep and his cousins Abhi and Babla Chaudhuri makes this world of illusion successfully alive. These children connect the reality through fantasy. The world of Sandeep, Abhi and Babla, during their holidays in Calcutta seems to be a fantasy world for them. There are many incidents that connect the real with fantasy in our day-to-day life. Each description of the objects is told with humour as these children try to make sense of the world of adult around them. They observe the actions of the adults as they are performing a play.

Chaudhuri stresses with great care the contrast between the adult's way of life and the child's world view. The following passage is written from the adult's point of view:

They [the children] lived in their own world which was half illusion, because it was founded so much on fantasy and half real, palpably real, because its tissue was wholly made of sensations. When they would grow up, and their lives and the lives of the grown-ups would be retold, they would seem like fairy tales and legends....They roamed in a silent, self-created web of sounds, smells and colors. (Chaudhuri, *Strange* 121)

Massage of the children before bathing, the act performed by Mamima, Sandeep's maternal aunt becomes magic to these children:

She twisted them, took them apart, put them together; --- 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 it till it shone, and then fix it, with a grim, satisfied smile, where it belonged. (Chaudhuri, *Strange* 7)

While reading this passage, a simple act of bathing takes on the overtones of a ritual and a keen sense of nostalgia assails the readers. When Sandeep was to take his first bath in Calcutta, the narrator observes: "There was a tap in the middle; at the top, a round eye sprinkled with orifices protruded from a pipe that was bent downward like the neck of a tired giraffe; this was the shower" (Chaudhuri, *Strange* 8-9). Here Sandeep compares the shower in the bathroom with

Giraffe's neck, which is beautifully described in the above lines. People use shower daily in their life but they have not imagined it to be a Giraffe's neck as Amit has described.

Every one in this world knows what storm is, it is the disturbance of the atmosphere with strong winds, but for the children they think that is the work of ghosts and spirits. It is clear that, the children can comprehend the ordinary realities through fantasy. Here instead of storm the supernatural is given importance by the children, where the adults were busy with their own work and they had no time to think of storm but these children were in their own imagination world thinking that it is the work of ghosts.

Here is another example for the children's imagination that an insect getting into the ear of child is a small incident for grown-ups but for Babla, he thought that the insect is on secret mission to spy on him and he describes the way the insect came out of his ear and it was killed by his mother.

A short while later, a flying-ant came out from the darkness of the tunnel into the dazzling, lighted space of the room. Its wings were sticky with oil, and it stumbled onto the pillow. It seemed overwhelmed by what it had seen in Babla's ear. Mamima killed it swiftly with a magazine, and it appeared quite ready to die, as if its mission in life were now complete. (Chaudhuri, *Strange* 97)

Amit Chaudhuri uses child's view of life to see ordinary things in new light. The daily happenings became defamiliarised when they are presented as miracles. Restoration of light after power cut is a usual thing which happens daily in the places of power shortage, but for the kids in this novel it is the work of some magician who do miracles by moving his magic stick. "The effect of the opposite of blowing out candles on a birthday cake: it was as if someone had blown on a set of unlit candles, and the magic exhalation had brought a flame to every wick at once" (Chaudhuri, *Strange* 70). Here again the reality is compared with the supernatural, while describing about the power supply after the power cut is usual in real life, but for the children it is the magic done by the magician.

Sandeep observe that children in Calcutta putting many strains to their studies gives the image of slaves in Ancient Egypt building a pyramid. "Meanwhile, children, like Egyptian slaves, dragged huge blocks of frustrating study all day to build that impressive but non-existent pyramid of success" (Chaudhuri, *Strange* 26).

The imagination of the writer connects the local ordinary happenings of life with the global world. Chaudhuri throughout the novel and in nine short stories did not give any clue for the title of the novel, except in one single passage. In first page of Abhi's book Sandeep finds the address of his home as follows:

Abhijit Das,
17 Vivekananda Road, Calcutta (South),
West Bengal,
India, Asia,

Earth, The Solar System,
The Universe.

Here the narrator remarks, “It was a strange and sublime address” (Chaudhuri, *Strange* 101). Abhi just being a child is trying to include the earth and the solar system with his local house address. Through this the child connects his home with the solar system and the Universe imaginatively.

There is another instance that connects the local with the global; the towel wrapped around the waist of Chottomama becomes “the Chieftain of some undiscovered, happy African tribe (Chaudhuri, *Strange* 64). Through this line it is evident that Chaudhuri’s use of imagination is well expressed in this line. Through this scene he makes Sandeep to think that Chottomama as the leader of an African tribe who wrapped his towel around his waist.

When Mamima receives a sari from Bombay as gift by Sandeep’s mother, she says that the pattern of the sari “which broke out into a galaxy of hand-woven stars, a cosmos of streaking comets and symbolic blue horizons” (Chaudhuri, *Strange* 5). In this the stars and the moon are connected with the local images.

In the world of children not a single event can be skipped. Here is another example that connects the religious and the national. Sandeep being a secular observer enjoys the colours of Indian flag, when Mamima goes to the prayer room and offering the gods of oranges, sweet white batashas and arranged slices of cucumber, the ceremony is observed by him and “to watch a grown—up at play. Prayer time was when adults became children again” (Chaudhuri, *Strange* 44). Sandeep remarks: “All that was important to gods and the mortals was the creation of that rich and endlessly diverting moment in the small chamber, that moment of secret, almost illicit, communion, when both the one who prayed and the one who was prayed to were released from the irksome responsibility of the world. Oranges, white batashas, cucumbers” (Chaudhuri, *Strange* 45).

In one afternoon in Calcutta, Sandeep and his cousins played energetic ‘pretend’ game of freedom fighters. They pretend to be as Subhash Chandra Bose and Mahathma Gandhi, Sandeep told Chottomama that he plays the role of Gandhi. Being a Marxist, he loses his control and says Gandhi was not a fighter and he was a sham yogi and started lecturing to the children.

Through this, one can realize that even the real histories are a kind of fantasy play to the children and this shows Chottomama as a devoted patriot and who strongly believes in Marxism.

Chaudhuri in this novel compares the city Calcutta with Modern art, while seeing the modern art it has no meaning but looks beautiful and exists for some reason. Likewise the city also has its rich tradition and heritage but it lacks its beauty in this congested society.

The novelist makes a sudden attack into literature, religion, mythology and science to create a new world and to connect with the world of Calcutta. The maid servant Saraswati’s footprints which are wet are “as rich with possibility as the first footprint Crusoe found on his island” (Chaudhuri, *Strange* 88). Sandeep, Abhi and Babla used to be flitting around the members of the family, when Chottomama is ill they kept themselves away. This act of the children is compared to the satellites. “The children floated like satellites in the distance, afraid

to collide with the painful orbit of adult lives, and yet always being pulled toward it against their will” (Chaudhuri, *Strange* 129).

The flower of orange gulmohar reminds the writer, “of a volcano erupting and balancing, momentarily, the unspilled lava in its mouth” (Chaudhuri, *Strange* 153).

The narrator observes that, the patients walking in the hospital garden in their loose shirts and white pyjamas looked like Adam who had been expelled from the garden of Eve.

The patient wore loose shirts and white pyjamas,Each looked like an Adam who had been expelled from his sacred garden, and now, grown old, had been permitted to reenter, to relearn his old ways and his own, most simple, movements. (Chaudhuri, *Strange* 148)

On seeing Chottomama lying on the bed when he had a heart attack, Sandeep imagined that his uncle is in board meeting with the directors are gathered on beds instead of chairs. No one can imagine like this but it is possible only through the children imagination.

Even small and ordinary things are observed by the novelist and it is imprinted in the readers mind by the images and through the metaphysical conceit. In every home man shaving his face is not an abnormal one, but for the novelist it is like a holy ritual.

The children watching Chottomama shaving his face as passer-by watching a monkey-show on the roadside, and this act of shaving is compared to ploughing in a “primitive agricultural fashion” similarly, bargaining in a market is a usual one, but this brings the narrator’s mind a very ugly image. (Chaudhuri, *Strange* 60)

One could spot a haggle from a distance: the customer and the vendor preaching endlessly to each other, like two devout and convinced priests on Judgment Day, one a mullah and other a clergyman, trying to convert the other to his religion. The market echoed with questions and replies. (Chaudhuri, *Strange* 54)

Chaudhuri, ironically compares the act of bargaining as a muslim and the clergyman are trying sincerely to convert the customers to their religion. In reality also this happens in every market which sometimes irritates the public.

In this novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address* one cannot predict the imagination of the novelist. His imagination can land anywhere and he compares it to anything. Thus, the clothes which are wrinkled carried out by the maidservant become “wispy bodies of dying children” in the arms of Mother Teresa (Chaudhuri, *Strange* 85). Similarly while carrying the small baby it was heavier for Sandeep, Abhi and Babla like “far heavier for them than King Janak’s bow was for Ram” they think that it is a big task for them to hold the child as King Janak’s bow was for Rama, through this the novelist transports us to a different world (Chaudhuri, *Strange* 49).

In this fiction the world of the children is magical because of its melody and poetry. The novel is very poetic, not for passion but of routine day-to-day life of middle class Bengali family in Calcutta. However the universe of children comes to life in this novel. He visualizes not only the physical or material settings in which he places the children, but also their physiological, emotional and psychological states of being. Through this he proves that the

routine life and normal things can be fascinating to children. This can bring all the joy and liveliness and magic of the short holiday, which is captured by Chaudhuri in this novel. The readers would feel that they live between two worlds, the world of day-to-day reality and the world of imagination.

Thus Chaudhuri brings out the imagination of children and presents the landscape of a child's mind which is an illusion of reality in *A Strange and Sublime Address*.

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