

## **Representation of Dispersed Identity in the Novels of Arundhati**

**Roy and Amit Chaudhuri**

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### **Abstract:**

This article addresses the issue of dispersed identity and studies various cultural phenomena in which the idea of a horizontal cultural space within a nation seems to be ruptured. The fictional characters of Arundhati Roy and Amit Chaudhuri exhibit a disseminating and dispersed nature of identities. They seem to be trapped in an interstitial space, reflecting the ambivalent nature of nation, national identity and national culture.

**KEY WORDS:** *Dispersal of identities, horizontal cultural space, cultural dissemination, nation.*

Homi Bhabha, in “DissemiNation, Time, Narration, and the Margins of the Modern Nation”, engages with the issue of dispersed identity. Bhabha borrows the term “dissemination” from Jacques Derrida to define the experiences of migration or of the scattering of people across nations. Bhabha speaks about a “time of gathering” - gathering on the edge of foreign cultures, for instance. He says: “the emergence of the later phase of the modern nation, from the mid–nineteenth century, is also one of the most sustained periods of mass migration within the west, and colonial expansion in the east” (Bhabha 1990: 290). According to him, the phenomenon like “mass migration” and “colonial expansion” creates a situation in which the space of the modern nation–state does not remain horizontal. There emerge cultural movements, the consequence being the dispersal of the identities and cultural orientations. Such experiences create a rupture in the entire structure of the imagined community, and the metaphor of participation on which the idea of nationhood is based, fails to unite those whose identities are dispersed and who have diverse cultural and ideological affiliations. Bhabha’s exploration into the liminality of the nation and its cultural and political

effects helps to understand the ambivalence of the idea of the nation and to understand some socio-cultural phenomena in Arundhati Roy and Amit Chaudhuri's fiction. The characters of Roy and Chaudhuri deconstruct homogeneous nationhood, and show a plurality of national allegiances. In an interview given to Swagoto Ganguly and Anjum Katyal, Amit Chaudhuri says: "All of us in India have had different selves within us." (Chaudhuri 2003:70). He comments that it is a result of our not specifically belonging to any one language, one culture or any one geographical space.

In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Chacko defines the Ayamenem family as more loyal to the colonial culture, than to the nation-state: "Chacko told the twins that though he hated to admit it, they were all Anglophiles, they were a family of Anglophiles. Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away" (Roy 1997: 52). The family's interest in western music and film, according to Chacko, also reflects the loyalty towards the colonial culture: "Chacko said that going to see *The Sound of Music* was an extended exercise in Anglophilia" (Roy 1997: 55). Chacko, studying at Oxford and Baby Kochamma, being extremely proud of her western orientation, form identities which are dispersed and show the nation's culture failing to create a horizontal space. Baby Kochamma's failed attempt to be close to Father Mulligan leads her to study at the University of Rochester in America. After she returns from America, she becomes a woman with full devotion towards American culture and habits: "... Baby Kochamma followed American NBA league games, one – day cricket and all the Grand Slam tennis tournaments. On weekdays she watched *The Bold and the Beautiful* and *Santa Barbara*, where brittle blondes with lipstick and hair styles rigid with spray seduced androids and defined their sexual empires" (Roy 1997 : 27). Baby Kochamma is put in charge of the children's formal education and she takes it as an opportunity to attempt at an internalization of the western culture, literature and ideology by the children. She makes Rahel and Estha reading the abridged version of *The Tempest*, by Charles and Mary Lamb. The selection of this text for introducing the children to the west also symbolically stands for a loyalty towards colonial ideology – *The Tempest* is often interpreted as a play about imperialist ideology. Baby Kochamma's indignation at the children's lack of interest in the western culture, expressed through their play of the English language while reconstructing it in their own terms, leads her to glorify Sophie Mol – Chacko's daughter through a western wife. *The God of Small Things* is a novel about the acts of breaking rules and crossing into forbidden territories, Ammu and her children being the "worst

transgressors.” Although it is a narrative of transgressing psychological, emotional and social barriers, it also obliquely refers to the transgression of national boundaries to locate one’s identity in a non–horizontal, interstitial space.

Like the Anglophile family of Rahel and Estha in *The God of Small Things*, in Amit Chaudhuri’s *A New World*, we find people with dispersed selves and psychological set up, with no loyalty towards so–called Indianness or national culture. The novel’s central character, Jayojit’s father Ananda Chatterjee was undoubtedly against the British Empire, yet the ideological and cultural framework of his mannerisms shows the influence of the colonial world: “He was one of those men who, after independence, had inherited the colonial’s authority and position, his club cuisine and table manners, his board meetings and discipline; all along he had bullied his wife for not being as much as a memsahib as he was sahib” (Chaudhuri 2000: 7). Admiral Ananda Chatterjee does not have any positive opinion on India’s socio–political or economic condition. Jayojit too has similar opinion and he believes that Indian economy is completely dependent on the west and economic reform is necessary: “Nothing but economic reform, he believed, could change India from a country living on borrowings from the west into a productive and competitive one” (Chaudhuri 2000: 30). Jayojit’s mother, on the other hand, is a victim of her husband’s fondness for western culture and mannerisms. She never went to abroad and yet this “imaginary place” has intruded in her life, making her constantly aware that she lacks something very desirable for making herself suitable for her husband. The west was “a territory that intersected with her life without ever actually touching it, and which had for her, its own recognizable characteristics” (Chaudhuri 2000: 40). Jayojit is trapped in an in-between space of a desire to know and adopt the cultures of the nation where he was born and the necessity of internalizing the values of the west where he resides. He possesses a special fancy, to be a part of the nation-building process in India “... given a choice of being born at any time in India’s past, he’d have chosen to be born in the thirties, so that he could have a taste of the first years of post–independent India...” (Chaudhuri 2000: 148). Jayojit laments for teaching Bonny the words “ma” and “baba” without teaching him “other things that surround those words in our culture.” Even the pet name “Bonny” is a product of “a strange western affectation from the old days”, a name given by Jayojit’s mother, who is bullied by her husband for not being westernized.

Amit Chaudhuri’s *A Strange and Sublime Address* is about a boy’s journey from Bombay to Calcutta and his attainment of knowledge about the city’s different realities, about identities. The boy – Sandeep represents the rootlessness of an identity which is dispersed: he

is a Bengali by birth, but knows no Bengali to be capable of reading Sarat Chandra, Bibhuti Bhushan, Tarasankar or Rabindranath. Sandeep is defined as “one of the innumerable language orphans of modern India.” The very title of the novel questions whether it is rational to define oneself through one’s language or geographical territory. The entire narrative of the novel centres around the fact that everyone has a “strange and sublime address,” with mixed cultural or territorial orientations. Sandeep finds in his cousin Abhi’s book an address written as:

“Abhijit Das  
17 Vivekananda Road  
Calcutta (South)  
West Bengal  
India  
Asia  
Earth  
The Solar System  
The Universe” (Chaudhuri 2000 : 80).

This “strange and sublime address” challenges the horizontal nature of one’s identity and belongingness. The territorial affiliation here is interpreted in terms of the local, national and global, all intersecting each other.

Like many other novels by Chaudhuri, *The Immortals* also deals with the expatriate Bengali identity. Nirmalya, the central character in the novel, finds that many of his friends in Bombay have no respect for Indian culture, whereas he himself tries to train himself in Indian classical music “...most of them planned to go to America some time in future and study management and ‘lay’ American women” (Chaudhuri 2009 : 122). The novel presents many examples of a generation which is rootless and estranged from the culture of the nation. Nirmalya’s friend Rajiv “... knew nothing about Indian culture. He thought people who went around talking about ‘Indian’ culture were only oily and pretentious” (Chaudhuri 2009: 125).

Chaudhuri’s *Afternoon Raag* presents the narrator as an expatriate Bengali living in Oxford, working on Lawrence and belonging to a “consciousness of Lawrence country.” His memory oscillates between his days in India and those in Oxford. Like many other expatriate Bengalis in Chaudhuri’s fiction, the narrator’s identity here belongs to elsewhere, without any root. His parents were originally from Sylhet in undivided Bengal. They went to London for few years and returned to India at last to live in Bombay. The narrator remembers his mother

speaking English in a Bengali tone, yet finds some of her expressions in English as extremely “un-Indian” constructions. The primary setting of the novel, Oxford also metaphorically stands for a space which does not offer anyone any concrete sense of belonging: the narrator feels that “Oxford itself is a temporal and enchanted territory that has no permanence in one’s life.” His three acquaintances in Oxford – Shenaz, Mandira and Sharma do not reach the level of or assuring him that he is not a stranger in the city; relationships are not fully realized and the city remains strange: “It is the city that remains, a kind of meeting place, modern and without identity, but deceptively archaic, that unobtrusively but restlessly realigns its roundabouts and lanes and landmarks, so that it never becomes one’s own, or anyone else’s” (Chaudhuri 2000: 189). The difficulty of defining one’s identity and cultural affiliation through geographical territory, because of cultural “dissemination” or dispersal of identities is the focal point of Chaudhuri’s majority of fictional narrative. The most crucial political phenomenon of the nation-Partition is also repeatedly referred to in *Afternoon Raag* as creating a fracture in the very idea of a homeland. The story of the country’s independence and of the nation-building process go simultaneously with the story of Partition: “So India took on a new shape, and another story began, with homelands becoming fantasies, never to be returned to or remembered” (Chaudhuri 2000: 201).

In the introduction to *Nation and Narration* Homi Bhabha defines “nation” as a powerful historical idea “where cultural compulsion lies in the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force” (Bhabha 1990: 1). Bhabha points out the existence of a “particular ambivalence” in the idea of the nation, the language of those who write of it and the lives of those who live it. This ambivalence emerges from the fact that nation has a cultural temporality which inscribes a transitional social reality. Benedict Anderson’s idea of “imagined communities” too points out the nation’s ambivalent emergence through a system of cultural signification. Bhabha’s definition of nation as a “narration” also defines the nation as construct coming to exist through various discourses. If nation is a product of a signifying process or discourses, the representational nature of the entire idea affirms its ambivalent nature. The characters of Arundhati Roy and Amit Chaudhuri redefine this ambivalent nature of nation, national identity and national culture. The transitional social reality, the absence of a horizontal cultural space in the lives of the characters of Roy and Chaudhuri emphasize on the disseminating and dispersed nature of identities, rather than on any common metaphor of participation uniting people across cultures within the nation or outside the nation.

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