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PERSPECTIVE OF CULTURAL SPACES IN AMIT CHAUDHURI'S WRITING**ABSTRACT**

The study focuses on the representation and the significance of cultural spaces in the novels of Chaudhuri. As this study foregrounds the term 'mapping cultural spaces', it is expedient to explain and elaborate the term culture and cultural spaces. Chaudhuri's novels represent the cultural spaces largely inhabited by middle class. Regional novels try to faithfully reflect the realities of a particular region, figuring the true sensibility of its inhabitants. The environment is often used to explain the character and action of its inhabitants. To depict the spaces with keen perceptiveness is not the singular trait of Chaudhuri's writing. Despite the changes in social, religious and political spheres at various stages of its historical and recent past, the spirit of Indian culture remains fundamentally unaffected. There has been a revival of traditional cultural modes and manners encompassing discrete areas of life and living. The present study seeks to fill this gap by undertaking the study of all his writing from the perspective of cultural spaces which mark his work in a very effective and vigorous manner. The chapter that follows is devoted to the critical exploration of his non-fictional work which may provide a key to understanding his fictional work.

KEY WORDS: cultural spaces, English Literature, Amit Chaudhuri and Indian Writing in English

PERSPECTIVE OF CULTURAL SPACES IN AMIT CHAUDHURI'S WRITING

This Article of Amit Chaudhuri's text has a title which is likely to suggest and produce both inquisitiveness and disagreement. The study focuses on the representation and

the significance of cultural spaces in the novels of Chaudhuri. It seeks to demonstrate, analyse and explore the meaning and value of cultural spaces which in turn enhance and expand the thematic emphases of the novels. These spaces also serve as a key to understand the author's thematic concerns, his vision of life, leading to comprehensive understanding of author's work and its proper appreciation. In Chaudhuri's writing, culture figures as a dominant trope informing the entire narrative in terms of both contexts and concerns.

As this study foregrounds the term 'mapping cultural spaces', it is expedient to explain and elaborate the term culture and cultural spaces. The term 'mapping' occupies the foremost position; hence it needs a neat clarification. Mapping in the specific context of cultural spaces stands as a potent modifier whose meaning extends beyond the simplistic meaning of the term. It connotes Chaudhuri's preoccupation with the cultures of the spaces inhabited, observed or experienced by him and his calibre as a writer with regard to his ability in the synthesis, evolution and final creative representation of these spaces. The term cultural spaces means by extension the cities like Kolkata, Mumbai (Bombay) and Oxford where the author has lived either for a long or relatively shorter period during his life. These spaces include both the domestic sites and spaces of cities such as streets, transport, shopping places, parking spaces, eateries, cinema halls, and malls and so on. In fact, the term cultural space scarcely excludes any substantial aspect of middle class life so dexterously represented by Chaudhuri in his novels.

Whenever we find a serious novelist taking up a particular standpoint or viewing objects from a particular angle, it generally reflects some innate necessity to do so. The focus given to the ordinary experiences of life, the preoccupation with the small and the trivial, the movement away from the grand and the heroic has been a characteristic practice of our age. Almost all the novelists of our time have concentrated on the common occurrences of life and have delineated their experiences from diverse angles. Encountering the everyday- that has been the greatest challenge to the modern novelist. They have tried out different ways to represent it.

Culture is the mode of generating meaning and ideas. It is a negotiation over which meanings are valid. Chaudhuri's novels represent the cultural spaces largely inhabited by middle class. These spaces are located in specific regions which explicitly announce not only the author's familiarity with them but an intense, inclusive and almost compulsive involvement of the author in terms of observation and experience. As such the region in

which the spaces of culture receive focused attention also acquires a prominence. Closely connected to the representation of the cultural spaces is the issue of elite and non-elite culture so hotly debated in cultural studies in the contemporary times? Chaudhuri adopts a middle course, choosing the middle class neither at the expense of elite nor non-elite (low) culture.

The study of cultural spaces in the novels of Amit Chaudhuri's subsumes both spaces inhabited by the characters and the ways in which they think, feel, respond and articulate. The social and personal interactions link the characters to the specific locale or region in which they lead their lives. This locale or region can be defined by its physical, human and functional characteristics such as customs, values, traditions, taboos and festivals. Chaudhuri's novels have their locale mostly in Calcutta (Kolkata), Mumbai and occasionally Oxford or London. He may be called a regional novelist but not in the manner of Thomas Hardy for Chaudhuri rarely confines himself to Hardyean Wessex. His Calcutta, Mumbai and Oxford hardly focus on grey areas of these particular regions as one may witness in Hardy's novels. He is mainly occupied with the lives of middle class Bengalis, famously known as 'bhadra lok' whose lives and culture he has attempted to map in his novels and prose writings. However, there is some distinction between the two. 'Local colours' is often confined to representation of surface particularities of a region, whereas the 'regional novel' deals with more deep-rooted, complex and general human characteristics and problems.

Regional novels try to faithfully reflect the realities of a particular region, figuring the true sensibility of its inhabitants. A regional writer concentrates best attention on a particular area and uses it and the people who inhabit it as the basis for his/her stories. Such a locale is likely to be rural and/or urban. The regional writer emphasizes and documents the geography, customs and speech of a particular place, with a more serious explanatory focus than for mere background information. The environment is often used to explain the character and action of its inhabitants.

However, this study of Amit Chaudhuri's writing seeks to explore the sites and spaces of culture which the author has tried to map in his stories, poems, essays and novels. In capturing the cultural ethos of middle class people, especially Bengalis, His works deal with the physical features, people, life, customs, habits, manners, traditions, languages and life-style of people of his own region. This, however, does not mean that his work is a mere factual reporting or photographic reproduction of reality. His ability to creatively capture the cultural ethos of a given region emphasizes the uniqueness, the various ways in which it distinguishes itself from other localities. The act of mapping the cultural spaces of select or

specific region covers the author's perceptiveness in showing the influence of particular spaces on the characters and events in the novels. He describes the hills, forests, the roads, the buildings, the architecture, the towns and the countries of his region and foregrounds them to his advantage. The space has been used as the background in his works. It plays an important role in the development of the plot and characterization. The spaces region participates in the works of Chaudhuri with all its aspects: nature, culture, legend, customs, conventions, superstitions, topography and environment.

He defines farmers, businessmen, labourers, fairs, market places, eateries, book-stores, river-bridges and the sea. He also depicts the backwardness and superstitions of the people, rustic songs and dances and Bengali cuisine. This he does with conviction because he has known them intimately. Domestic spaces acquire a unique significance in his writing, reflecting the culture and life-styles of middle-class people. To depict the spaces with keen perceptiveness is not the singular trait of Chaudhuri's writing. What distinguishes him as a notable contemporary novelist, poet, essayist, critic and musician is his crystalline miniaturist style. It is enhanced and strengthened in its effectiveness by the fact of his being deeply rooted in Bengali society and culture. Although he was born in Kolkata, grew up in Mumbai and studied in England, yet he never forgot his childhood. This is the main reason why most of his novels are set in Mumbai and Kolkata.

It is valuable to repeat that Chaudhuri's work is deeply engaged with the illustration of Bengali culture. But he is not limited within the limits of Bengali people and their culture. His work has a broader picture and extends far beyond it. It seeks to situate him in the wider context of Indian writing which reflects an amazing continuity and vitality of Indian culture and civilization. Centuries have moved by, millennia have come and gone, yet Indian culture goes on forever. It claims, without undue exaggeration, to be one of the oldest cultures of world. The love for peace, a sense of togetherness reflected in community-living, tolerance and above all unity in diversity characterize Indian culture. It is renowned for its love of truth, non-violence and warm hospitality. Despite the changes in social, religious and political spheres at various stages of its historical and recent past, the spirit of Indian culture remains fundamentally unaffected. There has been a revival of traditional cultural modes and manners encompassing discrete areas of life and living. In the course of centuries, the Indian culture has absorbed and adapted multiple foreign influences. Although, present-day Indian society has both consciously and unconsciously adopted western mores, ideas, fashions, goods etc., yet people do retain an innate love of Indian culture. Literature, at its best, might be taken as a cultural activity and product. The literatures of India have faithfully projected the life and

culture of India in diverse ways, reflecting the systematic progression of its culture. The sublime idea of Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram (the true, good and beautiful) has passed into Indian literature via its culture.

Chaudhuri is familiar with almost all prominent aspects and features of Indian culture. His writing reflects the representation of this composite culture rooted in the patronising ideal. Like all true Indians, Chaudhuri, too, is deeply attached to India. However, he is especially motivated towards the culture of Bengal, its language and literature. The biographical facts of his life disclose that though he was born in Calcutta, he could not learn Bangla language as he spent most of his school-going period staying in Bombay. However, he desired to learn his mother-tongue and when he came to his maternal uncle's house in Calcutta during vacations, he learnt reading Bangla. When he grew up, he cultivated an ever-growing interest in Indian classical music, a passion which did not relent even during his stay in England where he went for higher studies. He studied Bengali literature and other Indian literatures available in English translation even as he pursued his studies in English literature at London and Oxford.

As a creative writer, Chaudhuri has been influenced by his tutors Dan Jacobson and Karl Miller at University College, London. He forcefully declared that he essentially belongs to India in terms of its culture, language and the narrative tradition. But he cannot specify which India he belongs to, for, in a special way, he belongs to England also for having lived there for a number of years during his study. His love of the city, Calcutta demonstrates this best, reading its conclusion in his recent book 'Calcutta: Two years in the City'. In this book, the city with its people, spaces, sights, sounds, smells and quotidian activities serves as a microcosm of the vaster entity called the spirit of Bengali culture and by implication that of Indian culture.

A writer has, unavoidably, to be specific in his writing. This specificity entails the principles of both inclusion and exclusion. While he may concentrate his authorial gaze on either Calcutta or Bombay, he is obliged to exclude all other objects and spaces. The act of exclusion is implicit in the task of inclusion and quite often a writer alternates both these acts for purposes of contingency. Exclusion acquires prominence when he focuses on a small part of what he has chosen to include. Whenever he tries to merge a world/space he does not know intimately with the one he knows, he becomes lyrical rather than specific or realistic. Critics and scholars have tried to place Chaudhuri's writing within the frame of an alternative tradition of contemporary Indian English literature. In order to steer this new path - the

alternative tradition - Chaudhuri has put in a considerable time and energy. He has tried to explore and re-invent it as he found both the earlier literary traditions of Indian English literature inadequate to his authorial business. The first of these - the tradition of social and metaphysical realism - had Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao as its forbears. The second tradition was inaugurated by Salman Rushdie, extravagantly and fashionably imitated and mastered by his followers: magic realism and national allegory.

Chaudhuri is convinced that the middle class in India and elsewhere in the world came into being as a result of the working of the forces of modernity. And it is a fact confirmed and validated by thinkers, historians and theorists the entire world over. In this regard, he posits his dissatisfaction against the postcolonial theory which denies any history to India. The proponents of postcolonial theory fail to understand and realize that India had a history quite independent of colonialist. His main objection to postcolonial theory rests on its negation of the presence of the middle class in India. He argues that the writing in Bengali and Indian English novel are not the results of the influence of coloniality:

It is the condition of modernity, of industrialization, coming to India, and the middle class being formed. From that comes a certain kind of sensibility that expresses itself in the novel, whether through English or Bengali.” (On Belonging: 48)

Chaudhuri belongs to the elite upper middle class but he aligns himself with the middle class as he is keenly aware of the peculiar characteristics of a sheltered middle class life in India. It is precisely for this reason that he deliberately keeps away from Salman Rushdie and his ilk that propagate and foreground ‘magic realism’, privileging multiplicity polyphony, magic fairy tales, and fantasy over ‘nuance, delicacy and inwardness’. He has explained his stance and practice as a creative writer:

Now the kind of India I write about is a lower middle-class or middle-class India, and not just India, because I write about Calcutta in particular and Bengal, a post-independence Bengal. Reality, lyricising the experience of the middle-class and the spaces in which they live, I am not writing about fantastic India. I am not writing about an historical India, although I might be writing directly about history. The very fact that I am writing about real people means, I think, I am writing about people in history. (On Belonging, 48)

This appointment with reality accounts for Chaudhuri’s uneasy relationship with postmodernism which advocates liveliness and indeterminacy with regard to texts and their meanings. It looks down upon any writing which seeks to represent reality because

postmodernism disbelieves in reality and grand narratives. Chaudhuri is intensely preoccupied with aesthetics and emotions and above all with 'real people'. For the novelist, the life is the text and language is the source of renewing the perceptions of reality. Chaudhuri considers presence and fullness as the soul of Indian literature including, of course, Indian English literature too. As such he relates himself to the rich cultural and literary traditions of India and derives emotional fullness and sustenance. He loves sounds for the value of suggestiveness.

Chaudhuri's novels are a delightful read as they deal with 'real people' and 'people in history'. His novels place various degrees of focus on local culture and cultural spaces. His novels can be most enjoyed for their rendering of the physicality of spaces. Calcutta happens to be a more intimate space for him than Bombay, Oxford and Claremont. In fact, Calcutta figures prominently in all his novels. *A Strange and Sublime Address* is about a "boy's discovery of Calcutta a novel about spaces, streets, sounds, the auditory background with which an Indian lives". *Afternoon Raag* about the narrator-protagonist's estrangement from metropolis, *Freedom Song* about Calcutta "on the brink of change because of communalism, difference in the political atmosphere and economic liberalization". (On Belonging, 44-45) *A New World* is about Calcutta which is bereft of childhood magic and the poetry of the ordinary. *The Immortals* alternates between Bombay and Calcutta, focusing on the characters involved in their love and practice of music. Calcutta has occupied Chaudhuri since his childhood. It was the city he had loved in his youth and in whose lanes he had spent his tranquil childhood, holidays: one he had made his name writing about. In 1999, he returned with his family to Calcutta where his parents had moved after retirement. It seems that Chaudhuri's love of Calcutta is immense and inexhaustible because after having almost popularized the city through its representation in his novels, he did not derive full satisfaction.

The various ways of preparing food are highlighted because he relishes food imagery and suffuses it with poetry and symbolism. Chaudhuri's vision captures sights with their specificity. Nothing that can kindle the author's imagination escapes him. He registers accurately and describes in an engaging manner how a newspaper-hawker rolls a newspaper and throws it into balcony. He draws a picture of rickshaw-wallahs and shows how they idle away time by sleeping in the rickshaw, killing mosquitos by clapping their hands. The description of spaces like a bathroom acquires a peculiar significance in Chaudhuri's novels which contain minutiae of details. He shows these in **A Strange and Sublime Address** how Chhotomama sings while taking bath, how he starts his old car, how patients lie in the

hospital, the behaviour and gestures of the taxi-wallah, the conversation of non-Bengali teenagers, the activities of maid servants etc.

In addition to his fascination with local culture, Chaudhuri has an innate ability to watch, observe and record the minute of things. He has an eye and ear for everything that relates to and is related to the life of the middle class, especially the Bengali middle class which he depicts in his works. His creative genius is visibly focused on customs, traditions, superstitions and the life-style of the middle class. Their life-style includes the way people talk, take bath, dress themselves, worship and perform music, songs and dance. It also comprises the ways in which people respond and interact with one another, in brief, the humdrum quotidian routine of life. Such small and apparently insignificant details as applying mustard oil to the body of a child, washing of clothes, wringing them and spreading them on a clothes-line, serving and eating different varieties of foods, graffiti on the wall, the birds especially pigeons making abstract designs with their droppings cannot escape his eye. Chaudhuri's novels are largely, if not entirely, rooted in the Bengali middle class. This focus on the middle class makes his novels inclusive but one can ill afford to ignore the fact that he presents interesting and exciting vignettes of the daily ordinary life of the middle class which forms the backbone of Bengali society and culture.

However, the Bengali strain in the novels of Chaudhuri is very conspicuous. Apart from using his Bengaliness as tools to eroticize the East in its new avatar some Bengali writers (writing particularly in English) employ language, theme, moods, which are very culture specific? Chaudhuri dwells on Bengali culture but he is averse to exoticizing the East. He has certainly joined the distinguished group of writers from Bengal who write in English: Bharati Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Sunetra Gupta, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Ruchira Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and so on. Most of these writers seem to be more or less obsessed with Bengali culture which finds expression in their writing as direct references to Bengali culture: indigenous food ("luchi, tarkari, phuchkas, jilipi, shingara" etc.), human warmth, and the minute details of the Bengali middle class famously called "bhadralok". Moreover, their works offer precise charting of Calcutta moorings, often minutely recorded with documentary accuracy to such an extent that it might lead one to believe that these writers adopt realism as their basic mode of representation. Calcutta often figures with a sense of nostalgia. These writers cater to a specific cultural milieu- the middle class Bengali bhadralok culture. Chaudhuri has a distinct and distinguished place among these writers.

In fact, Chandhuri's involvement with Calcutta is almost lifelong. His first novella gives the impression that Calcutta was a city of the mind. In response to a similar question, Chaudhuri replied: I identified Calcutta as a place that was home. Home was interwoven with the Bengali language, my mother-tongue which was hardly spoken out of my immediate home. In school I spoke only English, so to go back to Calcutta was to re-enter the Bengali language. The Calcutta of Chaudhuri's childhood was on the brink of change. When the whole of India began to change in the wake of globalization, liberalization and privatisation, Calcutta alone could not resist the change, and to stay in mainstream it changed itself. So the Bengal and peculiar culture and which he considers psychologically to be his home, has passed through multiple transitions.

In addition to his literary caliber, Chaudhuri is a talented musician, trained in Indian classical singing. Song and music are embedded in the middle class Bengali life and culture. Almost all his novels have a dose of music and song and his latest novel "The Immortals" is entirely based on the theme of music. In short, he invariably allots much space to music. His music results from half-remembered tunes blended in memory. The foregoing discussion would seem to be a bit lopsided if a biographical profile of the author is not given. Amit Chaudhuri was born in Calcutta on 15 May, 1962 in a Hindu family of East Bengali origin. His father, Nagesh Chandra Chaudhuri and mother, Bijoya Chaudhuri, were both from Sylhet in East Bengal but left soon after Indian Independence in 1947 when the Indian sub-continent was trifurcated into India and two parts of Pakistan in the east and the west. Chaudhuri was brought up in Bombay. He studied English at University College, London.

This study of his novels seeks to be both exclusive and inclusive. It is exclusive in the sense of being confined to his five novels but it is also inclusive in the sense that it seeks to locate intertextual links among his other works and the texts of his favourite Bengali authors. His novels have attracted sufficient critical attention materializing in a number of scholarly papers and reviews but Amit Chaudhuri's work still awaits a book-length study. A laudable effort was made by Late S.B.Shukla who edited a volume of critical essays on Chaudhuri's novels. The present study seeks to fill this gap by undertaking the study of all his writing from the perspective of cultural spaces which mark his work in a very effective and vigorous manner. The chapter that follows is devoted to the critical exploration of his non-fictional work which may provide a key to understanding his fictional work.

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