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### Calcutta as the thematic Background: A Critical Study of Amit Chaudhuri's Novels

#### Abstract

Amit Chaudhuri was born in Calcutta and grew up in a corporate society i.e. Bombay. To know Calcutta was curiosity in his life as he spent his youth in Bombay. He has more affection for Calcutta, his region, where he belongs. Chaudhuri can be called a regionalist as a regionalist explores his region and the various features related to it like local colour, characters, dialect, customs, traditions, and topography, etc. Therefore, this study will proceed on the clear belief that Chaudhuri's works are strongly set in his region, Calcutta and being a regionalist he has tried to portray the real picture of Calcutta using all the features stated above. Thus, the scope of this study is to explore the importance of home with respect to various features like physical characteristics, people, life, customs, habits, manners, etc in the novels of Chaudhuri.

**Keywords:** Regionalist, Traditions, Topography, Dialect, etc.

Regional novel is a work of fiction which deals with physical characteristics, people, life, customs, habits, manners, tradition, language etc of a particular region. Regionalism does not signify the factual reporting or photographic reproduction. The regional artist focuses on the features of a selected locality or region. The writers portray the typical habits of particular areas. The idea of local colour has been literally well articulated in the fiction of Thomas Hardy, Jack London, William Faulkner, R.K. Narayan, Sarah Orne Jewett, Bret Harte, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mark Twain, etc.

As Hardy, the great Victorian novelist keeps the spirit of Wessex alive before our mind in his novels as well Narayan's Malgudi, and William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, in the same way Amit Chaudhuri has achieved greatness by writing about his region, Calcutta in his own way. Calcutta is the literary home of Indian writing and Chaudhuri as a novelist, essayist and musician finds a sense of comradeship and portrays the real picture of his region. In the world of Indian fiction in English, Calcutta is familiar turf and is aptly called the

culture capital of India. Calcutta provides the setting for almost all of Chaudhuri's novels. In most of his novels, the region Calcutta is the main thematic background. Chaudhuri writes about Calcutta as a complete insider and shares their way of life and essential mores. The place becomes the backdrop for the customs, beliefs and ethical codes. It expresses the authors' point of view. Thus place and people are the inside and, Calcutta his region presents a vision of India in Miniature. This is very well presented through his novels.

Amit Chaudhuri was born in 1962 in Calcutta and grew up in Bombay. He went to Britain to study at University College London and then at Balliol College, Oxford. He has also been creative Arts Fellow at Wolfson College and Leverhulme Fellow at Cambridge University, a visiting Professor at Columbia University and Samuel Fischer Guest Professor of Literature at Freie University, Berlin. His novels have won several major awards, and he has received international critical acclaim. His first novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address*, was published in 1991 and his second, *Afternoon Raag*, in 1993. He wrote *Freedom Song* in 1998 and since then he has written *A New World* (2000) and a collection of short stories, *Real Time: Stories and Reminiscence* (2002). Chaudhuri's latest work is *D.H. Lawrence and Difference: The Poetry of the Present* (2003) in which he looks at Lawrence's position as a foreigner in the English Canon- an ongoing critical project and his fifth novel *The Immortals* is published in 2009.

There are several well known writers, who write about Calcutta, Amitav Ghosh is a well known writer who straddles between both the Eastern and Western worlds regularly and often takes recourse to his Bengali roots. The city, Calcutta is present in his novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* where he carefully and realistically sketches out the background with local colour of the place. Bharati Mukherjee, a well known American writer, brought up in an upper-middle class Bengali family, wrote her first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter* using the autobiographical elements, has her roots and her city, Calcutta in it. The sense of Bengaliness is also very frequent in the writings of Jhumpa Lahiri. Though she lives in the United States but her work is filled with Bengali culture and sensibilities. She has set some of the stories of *Interpreter of Maladies* in Calcutta. The other name that comes to one's mind is Amit Chaudhuri, whose almost all the works are set in Calcutta. Sheobhushan Shukla and Anu Shukla in their article "The Novels of Amit Chaudhuri" writes:

One of the things for which they can be profoundly enjoyed is the rendering of the physicality of space in his novels. Calcutta happens to be a more intimate

space for him than Bombay, Oxford and Claremont. Wherever Chaudhuri might be in the world and for whatever period, Calcutta is ever present before his mind's eye. In fact, Calcutta is the protagonist of all his novels. (9)

Chaudhuri as a novelist loves giving details of daily life, the unremarkable incidents that go largely unnoticed. He has a special gift of observing the details in ordinary situation and to transport them into his works. The representation of the minute details of daily life reveals that he is working within the context and an established tradition. Chaudhuri's originality lies in one fact that his way of presenting daily life with minute details is entirely different. In the same context, Upamanyu Chatterjee a well known writer has shown how Agastya in *English August* visualizes his everyday but it has immense boredom:

Tonic's office was about fifteen kilometres away from the home. At a red light he decided, while eyeing a neighbouring fiat painted an impossible red, that he was not going to do the journey every day. He wondered why he was going to meet Tonic, he did not particularly want to work with him . . . A bus overlooks him, with office-goers hanging out of the door like tongues out of canine mouths... Moreover, his questions would contract to whether he would be able to catch his most convenient bus and whether he would get a seat on it. (168)

Chaudhuri has an unusual liking for Bengali middle class, so it is useless to condemn him for confining himself to certain local spaces in Calcutta and dwelling on the particularities of their local culture. He is actually forming micro worlds. He talks of India, Bengal and Calcutta in the similar breath as if they are the same. Similarly he is hesitant to any Indian culture, he talks of the culture of Calcutta and by implication suggests the culture of Bengal and India. He himself confesses, "I grew up with Bengali and Bombay culture, which was a mishmash of western culture and the local culture" (Galvan, 220). Chaudhuri believes in the essence of realism and portrays his locality or regions, Garland also believed the same and has written in his essay "The Question of Success", "Write of those things of which you know most, and for which you care most. By so doing you will be true to yourself, true to your locality, and true to your time" (35).

Among the city novels written by the Indian novelist on different themes relate directly or indirectly to the city of Calcutta, Chaudhuri's novels do have a special focus on some of the leading aspects of the present day city of Calcutta. Chaudhuri's first novel *A Strange and Sublime Address* is about Sandeep, a twelve year old boy endowed with child

like perception. The novel is basically a portrayal of Calcutta and life around it as seen by Sandeep who is on his vacation to the city. It is a sketchy description of a Bombay bred Bengali boy who has come to his city, Calcutta where he belongs. Though the novel is all about the visit of Sandeep to his maternal uncle's home but Chaudhuri's focus is on his region, Calcutta. Everything appears to him to be new and strange where every modest finding is a disclosure to new thing which is recorded carefully and exactly. The details of the entry of Sandeep, the lanes in Calcutta, every minute detail is described in an interesting manner. Moreover he is curious about everything he comes across and takes interest in every new thing and tries to identify himself with his region. He tries to explore the world with a fresh mind. The richness of Bengali culture is presented in a descriptive manner. Sandeep's first trip to Calcutta is separated from his second by an interval of eighteen months. Even though the second trip is heightened by the presence of Sandeep's father which meant that he would stay with his parents at the Grand Hotel instead of his uncle's home with his cousins, but he chose to spend his days and nights at the old house of Chhotomama with his cousins. Chaudhuri's focus is always on his region, Calcutta and the novel is all about the visit of a boy to his maternal uncle's home. As he confessed to Galvan, a critic and says, "I wasn't consciously interested in Sandeep as a character. Sandeep was just there, but to me the city of Calcutta, and Chhotomama, and that house, those were what interested me" (221). Sandeep, on his visit to his uncle's house in Calcutta, finds the following wordings on the first page of his cousin's book:

Abhijit Das,  
17 Vivekananda Road,  
Calcutta (South),  
West Bengal,  
India  
Earth  
India  
The Solar System  
The Universe (72)

Chaudhuri's second novel *Afternoon Raag* is a semi-autobiographical novel and it is about the nostalgic moods depicting the life of a young man who left his city to study abroad. The novel is built around the anonymous male character, and each chapter is almost an independent lyrical picture of memories, evocations of feelings, and the narrator's

recollections of his childhood, the noise, the smells of food of his region, Calcutta. Homesickness, nostalgia, and ambivalence about belonging to his region, Calcutta permeates the narration. He visits his region, Calcutta at intervals through nostalgia as an outsider, which gives him calmness. A real picture of Calcutta is portrayed through him, the characters, the topography of the region, etc. He used to visit Calcutta during his holidays and at the end, settles in Calcutta only. The narrator feels so lonely in the new culture, i.e. England and is not able to adopt the new culture. He feels alienated and longs for his homeland, Calcutta and his parents. The protagonist is physically in Oxford but mentally he is at home, Calcutta with his parents and people around.

The narrator is so fond of his home that sometimes he is jealous of local undergraduate students of his university as they could visit their homes anytime. The protagonist was away from his home and when he saw students going home, he would become more inclined to go to Calcutta. He misses his home more during these periods. He says, "Home, where one gathers from their talk, happiness or unhappiness is a more unsurprising, everyday affair than here, home, where, one speaks another language, with sister and mother and father" (231). The importance of home and homeland is very beautifully explained by the author. After the retirement of narrator's father, his parents decided to leave Bombay and moved to Calcutta. Calcutta is the city which is described by him delightfully and he feels very proud in doing so. His father came to the city, Calcutta about fifty years ago and lived in a hostel. Being a pure Bengali, he would eat great quantities of rice in the canteen, and never left a fish head uneaten. About Calcutta he says:

Calcutta is my birthplace. It is the only city I know that is timeless, where change is naturalized by the old flowing patterns, and the anxiety caused by the passing of time is replaced by fatigue and surrender. It is where my father, having left Sylhet, came as a student fifty years ago. Those were the last years before independence; and my father lived in a hostel in North Calcutta. (243)

His third novel, *Freedom Song* is set in the backdrop of early 90s. It is about the city, Calcutta and describes the life history of two inter-related middle class families of Khuku and Bhola Biswas. The Calcutta in the novel has changed by twenty five years of left rule, in the midst of economic and intellectual paralyses. The novel hints a great change, i.e. globalisation is coming over India and over the world too, with economic liberalization. Calcutta, in the novel, refuses to participate in both of these challenges. It ironically explores

the story of two closely related families in Calcutta and their domestic life becomes representative of the culture. Chaudhuri specifically depicts the life of Bengali middle class families of Khuku and her brother Bhola Biswas. Bhaskar, the protagonist of the novel, is the eldest son of Bhola. He is a member of the Communist Party. He tries very hard to organize and stage a Marxist inspired street play to bring in unity, harmony and tolerance among all communities. He brings his family into double dilemma to find a suitable bride for him and to persuade him to concentrate on his own life instead of indulging in Party work. In this novel, Chaudhuri explores Bhaskar's quest for identity as a communist activist as well as a husband. As per Bruce King, "*Freedom Song* can be read as about Calcutta and Bengali since independence" (392). Chaudhuri himself says about *Freedom Song* in "On Belonging," "I really think of it as an extended poem about the end of certain phase in Calcutta, in Bengali culture, and in Indian culture" (50).

Bhola loved his city, Calcutta so does his wife but she wanted to go out on a trip outside Calcutta. She asked her husband but he refused. She then remembered the places she had visited with other members of the family like Gopalpur, Nabadweep, Kathmandu, etc. She had great fun and pleasure and there she even made friends with other Bengalis like herself who had visited the places from Calcutta. She had not gone anywhere since long time and wanted to go places like Haridwar, Kashi on the banks of the Ganga to the long swinging bridge in Lakshmanjhula. She even wanted to go to Manik who was out of India. Her husband loved Bengal and Bengali food. He loved every form of cuisine, but when it comes to traditional Bengali food, nothing else can score more. According to her:

Her husband loved this city. He loved its fish, rui and katla and koi with black oily scales, and during the monsoons he would cry out a truism that he repeated with great ardour at this time every year: 'Ilish is the king of fishes!' He was a tense man, it was difficult to discuss anything with him without getting into a serious argument - all his life he had been like that. But take him out of Calcutta, and one could imagine him becoming unhappy and quiet. (324-325)

His fourth novel, *A New World* deals with the life of an America based Indian professor, Jayojit who visits Calcutta with his son, Bonny after his divorce. Jayojit is married to a Bengali woman, Amala, but the marriage falls apart and Amala is awarded the custody of the child. He challenges the custody under the Indian laws as the country adopted i.e. United

States is not able to help him in this regard. So he returns to Calcutta to his parents and his region Calcutta accepts him and gives him a sort of support which U.S, his adopted country is not able to do. A new world, the place was new to father and the son, watches Jayojit and his son as they share beautiful moments with each other. In Calcutta, Jayojit lives with his parents. Chaudhuri explain with elegance the details of married lives of an elderly couple entrenched in the unquestioning roles of their past and of a modern marriage. This novel focuses on the small events of everyday life: eating, going to the bank, and dealing with neighbours, servants, acquaintances and relatives in his region, Calcutta. Through his sensitive descriptions of the daily trivialities of life, Chaudhuri manages to convey the wonderful, almost magical, quality that one sees only in the place one loves. Subroto Roy's remarks on the content of the novel is revealing in *The Literary Criterion*:

The bulk of this book is, however, not about adultery or America's Indian immigrants or economics, as the author and publisher have projected it to be. The bulk has to do with the author speaking as he has done before, sometimes in excruciatingly tedious detail, about his own life as he has lived it in Calcutta's upper middle class Sunny Park Apartments, half way between the traditional Bengali area of Gariahat market and the Muslim/Anglo Indian area of park crius and park street. (10)

S. Shyamala in her paper on "Old Snapshots in New World: Realism in Amit Chaudhuri's *A New World*" has said about author and the novel, "He attempts to map out the nation, its changing cultural configurations and economic preferences through the story of a globalised Bengali middle-class family of Calcutta" (152).

Chaudhuri is a realist and he has depicted the small, ordinary details of everyday life of an individual. He focuses on the presentation and peculiarities of Calcutta and its inhabitants. He believes it to be important for the writer to express realistically in their writings people, culture and land of their region. He has tried to bring out the essence of his region, Calcutta using different aspects. He has talked about the routine, commonplace activities and by doing so he brings out the local colour of his region, Calcutta.

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