



THE CRUMBLING OF IDENTITY AND CULTURAL IMBALANCE: A DIASPORIC STUDY OF AMIT CHAUDHURI'S AFTERNOON RAAG

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Abstract

Amit Chaudhuri is a prominent literary figure in the modern Indian canon with his genres of novels, poetry, essays, criticism, and music composition. He has been conferred with the Commonwealth Writers Prize, the Betty Trask Prize, the Encore Prize, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction and the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award and many others. An elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, his books like *A Strange and Sublime Address*, *Afternoon Raag*, *A New World*, and others provide a supple and an intricate view of people's everyday lives. His works give an autobiographical and a delicate observation of the ironical relationship between middle-class expectations and realities. Chaudhuri localizes the cultural imbalance that people face during displacement and the fragile nature of nostalgia. This paper will highlight the cultural complexities of the various characters in *Afternoon Raag* (1993), his second novel, while trying to identify the self-travelling into finding a space in-between real and adopted homes. He vividly showcases the complicated love and the intrigued loneliness and melancholy that draws the protagonist back to his roots. Chaudhuri here also exhibits his evocating writing and clearly blurs the line between prose and poetry. So, the chief focus would be to analyse the loss of identity and individuality due to the shifting of space.

Keywords: culture, identity, the individual self, displacement, nostalgia, expectation

1. INTRODUCTION

Identity or the realization of what we call the self is what drives people to self-enlightenment. In the absence of an identity, what is left behind is a body without a soul wandering through the by lanes of life and offering nothing but melancholy and despair. As Ileana Mihaela in her research paper "Afternoon Raga of an Uprooted Indian on the Routes of Displacement: The Search of Identity Through Healing Memory" (2018) rightly observes the issues of immigration, globalization and integration also have a massive impact on forming a brand-new identification in the new space. This paper makes an attempt to show that the Indian immigrant to the British arena also passes through alienation in its course towards integration with the new space because of displacement and the memories of the lost home. The person who is displaced contains the archetype of every immigrant uprooted from its local space, yearning behind it. The possibility of total integration then loses, as the bonds with the uprooted individual's tradition still remains strong. As soon as separated, the immigrant can never create its area of receding without experiencing the sensation of being uprooted. The roots of the native area vanish which once provided stability and gave a sense of security and belongingness. In the mobility among these two routes, the Indian immigrant vacillates among order and chaos, and leads to a bewildering confusion regarding moving identities "as the very capacities in which one is defined on various levels, or within various circles such as

family structure, local life, the workplace, and the nation, make one necessarily multiple and not fully congruent with only one identity definition. As for the notion of sameness it is challenged by the contextual transience of situations and categories" (Kral, 26). The immigrant then becomes intended to reap integration within the new society, by the usage and formation of a new identity that could fit more easily into the new social structures. The individual then continuously compares his/ her own self with the foreign standards through a manner of self-analysis so as to create an aura of attractiveness and combat the feeling of homelessness.

The new identity formed out of such circumstances is in fact, a hybrid one and enables the displaced to lose its own identity and compels the individual to discover a mid-way between following its overbearing traditions and the popular overseas ones. In the battle among the inner world and the outer global, the struggle for settlement keeps hardening between the absent home and the present arrangement.

Amit Chaudhuri is a master exponent of such perplexing identity crisis and through his works tries to bring out the fragility of people existing in their diasporic settings. Narrating the mundane yet vivid images of the domesticated lifestyle with delicate observation, he makes the readers visualize the familiar reality of our daily life

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and in novels like the one under study, the constant efforts of the immigrants to adapt to the new world and forget about the land they were born in and the culture they breathed in. Saikat Majumdar in an interview with Chaudhuri also feels that there is something in the form of Afternoon Raag that differentiates it from the logic of narrative, breathing into it a life-force of music or poetry which the author terms as the impulse of storytelling. Chaudhuri as a part of his works also house this confusing selfhood as a man born in Bengal and brought up collectively in both his birthplace Calcutta and Bombay, where his father worked. He later graduated from Oxford University. The days he spent there have a huge impact on his writings which shaped out of his experiences of living in a foreign country and being a misfit because of his strong attachment to his nativity.

A novel about arrivals, departures, new life, old memories, old home and new dwelling, *Afternoon Raag* (1993) by Chaudhuri applies the concepts of dislodgment and nostalgia throughout its course of action. A winner of the Encore Prize, this novel, written as a first-person narrative account the story of a young Bengali man uprooted from his country and enroute to displacement. Semi- autobiographical in nature, the novel has taken apt excerpts from the author's life as a student who got trapped in his predicament of choosing between the Oxford life and life in his own country trying to adapt to integrate into the foreign one but often returning to old memories. As James Wood in his Introduction to the novel on its twenty-fifth anniversary has rightly pointed out, "nothing much 'happens' in *Afternoon Raag*, though everything is at stake: the homelessness of the self, the working of memory and desire, the music of chance." (9)

The novel is full of instances where the unnamed narrator is found fluctuating, sometimes between Oxford and India, between Mumbai and Calcutta, and between Mandira and Shehnaz in his struggle to adjust amidst his feelings of nostalgia, alienation and loneliness. The chapters also oscillate between here (the campus of Oxford) and there (the narrator's hometown and birthplace in India) throughout the novel. Everything that he sees is minutely examined and compared: how the English rain does or doesn't have a similarity with the Indian rain; what it feels to sit on the top floor of a double decker- bus and see Oxford and then to notice the Indian bus driver who wants to fit into the world of the colonizers in his 'more- English- than- the- English' politesse and in the attempt seeming the most Indian. The contrasts are evident- India is shown as a land that is more vivid, lively and rich in substance, whereas life at Oxford is shallow and lacks the depth of consciousness and soul, where people meet once and forget and where an encounter is: "an encounter that does not bring up a memory or a connection, but something in their place, neither a memory or a connection, which causes one's identity to reconstitute itself." (Chaudhuri, 103).

This dilemma to adjust or not, begins as his tryst as a student at Oxford starts. The process of settling down troubles him so much that he spends most of his time in his room and it is only when he sees students with their sleepy faces and their odd, comical gait walking down the road hurriedly to attend classes- that he would feel an at-

homeness pleasure. Adding up to the challenge, the uniqueness of his student life makes things look more complicated as his nostalgia gets triggered more with his memories of the different rooms he has studied in, "his temporary enclosures and crystallization", his "awareness and memory of furniture and windows and spaces" (Chaudhuri, 9). At first, Oxford may seem interesting with its students belonging to different nationalities and individual features, their different voices and accents, and their different habits and attempts at adjustment, but later the only memories that can be retained are those of "the silence of the doorway and the world beyond it" (Chaudhuri, 101) and the students always appear blurred. As a disciple of music too, the narrator does not seem to be at ease. Asfar Sadath in his essay entitled *Diasporic Dilemma in Amit Chaudhuri's Afternoon Raag* observes the bond between the author and his Guru breaks when he gets admitted to Oxford. Although practicing the Ragas on the tanpura gives him the much-needed temporary relief, the sudden news of his Guru being on the death bed adds to his recurring anxiety of not being at a comfortable space and his identity as a classical singer begins to shake.

Exploring the influence of the region on the characters and events of his novel, Chaudhuri describes and compares the streets, the buildings, the architecture, the towns and the countryside of both- the adopted and the host country. For *Afternoon Raag*, the region acts much more than a mere setting or a background and plays an essential part in the impoverishment of the plot and the characters. The regions participate in the story with all their aspects of nature, culture, conventions, fantasies, landscape and setting. He finds waking up in England is different as he hears nothing, when one has been accustomed to waking up in India and hear the crowing of the crows- "this absence of noise would fill me with a melancholy which was difficult to get rid of because it seemed to have no immediate cause" (Chaudhuri, 10). The protagonist although positioned in Oxford, often returns to his family home in Mumbai and, later, to Calcutta. He drifts into two worlds literally- on his trips back and forth- both physically and imaginatively and finds himself lost most of the times.

After the region, the 'space' acts as the most important element in the novel in the creation of identity and facilitates in the process of assimilation. It functions as a support for the intermingling of conflicting feelings experienced by the displaced, those who bring along with them, their set of culture, traditions, myths, and their past and present identities. However, 'space' here describes not only the outside world, but the inner world of an immigrant as well. The inner space is what becomes internalized along with everything that happens outside. The protagonist's friend, Mandira associates her inner space with her bedroom, "the room became her refuge, her dwelling, and when she said, 'I want to go back to my room', the words 'my room' suggested the small but familiar vacuums that kept close around her, that attended to her and guided her in this faraway country" (Chaudhuri 21).

Even the narrator's other friend, Sharma finds solace in hiding in the clothes- closet and keeps the wall of his room covered with pictures of Indian gods and goddesses as a

way of keeping in touch with his Indian roots. Similarly, Mandira's retirement to her room suggests that the room actually fulfils her need for an intimate space and makes her feel at home. The inner space enhances different roles- healing the nostalgia created and becoming a shelter from rejection and disownment in a foreign land: "because, for a foreigner and a student, the room one wakes and sleeps in becomes one's first friend" (Chaudhuri 21). While talking about the outer space at Oxford, the narrator although agrees that it is "dream- like" but the pain of being out of space gets evident: "one begins to get distanced from Oxford; more and more, one sees it as one's own dream, an illusion or vision composed relentlessly of others, but not shared by anyone" (Chaudhuri, 92). Apart from Oxford, he also feels disjointed with his own home when his parents move to a new flat in Bombay while he was studying abroad. He visions the flat not like his own but something new, devoid of the naturalness of his old place. He experiences the defamiliarization of the familiar.

In *Afternoon Raag*, language too helps in the process of adaptation. Sharma is found to restrict the radar of his turning into an Indian- English by his desire to learn the British language and represents a student who embraces life in Britain, unlike the narrator, still remaining utterly Indian. Shifting the narrative to India, the nameless hero further tries to bring out other shades of the usage of language as he remembers with fondness the Sylheti dialect with which his parents interacted. He goes on to describe his mother's English, decorated with her Bengali accent and how unlike other Indians, her speech was painted with English proverbs and delicate, un- Indian constructions. His mother's English reminds him of her lovable homely melody, but at the same time makes him aware of the fragility that's growing- his painful nostalgia- and the realization of not being at home. He also remembers the way two of his neighbours (Chhaya and Maya) in India watched American movies all day, and spoke the little English they knew "with an American accent- a sign of both ignorance and confidence"- which put their grandmother "at an imagined disadvantage and gave her a conscious uprightness of bearing in that building, where everyone was a master of Bombay English" (Chaudhuri 73). However, language too seems to fail at resolving the conflict of his identity as it represents the lost home of his parents in Bangladesh to which they could never return and the helplessness of the widowed grandmother in feeling left out in the fast-changing world.

Love comes as a relief to the narrator in London and he tries to cover his fear of losing himself by connecting with female friends. But he soon feels negotiating between two girls Mandira and Shehnaz. Shehnaz is from Lahore and has been divorced once. She too, in need of a shoulder to lean on gets intimate with the narrator. Although they love each other, he still feels confused as he finds himself not emotionally attached to her. The narrator then develops feelings for another Indian student, Mandira. The two become friends first as citizens of the same country who meet regularly to drive out their feelings of rootlessness and in the due course turn into lovers. However, the narrator fails to keep up the many promises that he has made to her and Mandira meanwhile realises that the

narrator is not the right person for her. She decides to skip her last semester and moves out of the university. Shehnaz, unlike Mandira completes her studies. When the narrator returns to India, he thinks about repossessing his relationship with Shehnaz but decides not to do so. His dismissal occurs as he realises that his reminiscence of Shehnaz occurs because of the temporariness of his nostalgia of love. This clearly shows his disillusionment as a person who also goes on to lose his identity as an ideal lover. He understands "that one's relationship with one's lover could have only taken place in Oxford, and has no meaning outside it..." (Chaudhuri, 92)

One may speculate that after the "slightly unreal experience" of Oxford gets over, the displaced student would finally move away from the indifference of the setting. He would return to his 'home', to his country where he was born and brought up. But for the narrator, the relocation to India, or to be precise, Calcutta does not help much as he recognizes and is forced to accept the fact that there is nothing worth returning to, as the times have changed, his childhood life has dissolved and he has to now live in a new space, a space that's similar to Oxford University. He would now be suspended in a home that may or may not welcome him and own him like the older one.

Devika Bose in her work "The Novels of Amit Chaudhuri: Stories with Beginning, Middle or Ends" also comments that throughout *Afternoon Raag* there is a smooth transit from the present to the past and then again from the past to the present. The narrator is found recollecting events from his childhood, the routine life of his parents, the music classes with his Guru and then all of a sudden, returns to his present life at Oxford. He is a young man negotiating a *modus vivendi* between his inherited and his adopted home with his identity on the verge of crumbling. The only way of survival is through escaping to the mundane-

"In a city so little known, so full of such instances, such escapes, events and the memory of events become temporary stays; Shehnaz, Mandira's room, the walks taken together, a meeting with Sharma, reassure one that one has not been in Oxford alone, that one has shared it with others, till the solitary experience of being in transit returns, and friends and acquaintances are borne away by this city, which renews itself, and becomes, once more, strange to oneself. 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 99)

Thus, Chaudhuri's *Afternoon Raag* showcases the narrator's belongingness towards his roots. The novel is a beautiful representation of inheritance and solitary. It draws from the commonness of the everyday life and forwards into a process of revival after being lost. It is a portrayal of not only the narrator, but of every other person in the novel who feels the urge to let go of the feeling of alienation and embrace the newer culture which wants their complete attention. But the catch is to not entirely demark the points that link them to their real

selves or to the places that they have once inhabited. The values that they have lived with and still feels attached to remain intact with them as they travel in the course of their lives. The narrator, although an unknown figure, represents the common people travelling in search of their identity. The feeling of losing one's identity and recreating it again in a land, far away from their known notions seems to be a complex procedure. This complexity of an individual's identity results out of self-inflicted ethnical injustice and social prejudices. In order to survive and regenerate in such a scenario, one requires the ability to withstand extreme changes and moving forward with time and giving oneself the pace and space to re-balance. Chaudhuri deals with these temperaments with the feelings of rootedness and reminiscences of his nostalgia.

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