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of English

S. T. HINDU COLLEGE, NAGERCOIL-2, Tamilnadu, India



Representation Of Cultural Ethos In Amit Chaudhuri's *Afternoon Raag*

Mrs. T. Annalakshmi,
Assistant Professor of English,
Sri Sarada College for Women,
(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli)
Tirunelveli.

Dr. S. Geetha,
Assistant Professor of English,
Sri K. G. S. Arts College,
(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli)
Srivaikundam.

Dr. Anita Albert,
Assistant Professor of English,
PG & Research Department of English,
V.O. Chidambaram College, Thoothukudi – 8
(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli)

ABSTRACT

Amit Chaudhuri is a stand out amongst the most observed Indian novelist in English. His writings reflect the sensibility and simplicity of Indian values coated in Bengali culture. His novels have won many major awards and he has accepted international critical applause. The select novel *Afternoon Raag* has Oxford, Bombay and Calcutta as its locale and background. The city of Calcutta and the protagonist's relation to it remains the common feature of this novel. Sandeep is a young man studying at Oxford. This novel presents the narrator as an expatriate Bengali living in Oxford. His memory oscillates between his days in India and those in Oxford. This paper tries to mirror Chaudhuri's reflection towards socio-cultural perspective which is practically mapped in the frame of diasporic consciousness.

KEY WORDS



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Dispersal of identities, horizontal cultural space, cultural dissemination and diasporic consciousness.

Amit Chaudhuri is a stand out amongst the most observed Indian novelist in English. He is born at Calcutta in 1962 and grows in Bombay. He educated English at University College, London and completed a doctorate on the verse of D.H Lawrence at Balliol College, Oxford in 1993. He is a poet, novelist, essayist, literary critic and also a good singer. Amit Chaudhuri belongs to the category of writers who depicts Bengali culture and its people in their novels. His writings reflect the sensibility and simplicity of Indian values coated in Bengali culture. He belongs to a new wave of writers with roots in post emergency India. His works are partly set in India and England. There are no cataclysmic occasions in his works. He manages quotidian city life, portraying collaboration with family workers, Indian culture, and sustenance. At the more profound level, he investigates the subjects of displacement and belonging through his characters that are not at home. However, they are in their well known home areas. His novels have won numerous major awards and he has received international critical applause. The select novel *Afternoon Raag* has Oxford, Bombay and Calcutta as its locale and background. The city of Calcutta and the protagonist's relation to it remains the common feature of the novel.

The characters of Chaudhuri deconstruct homogeneous nationhood, and show a plurality of national allegiances. In an interview given to Swagato 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. The select novel *Afternoon Raag* seems to be more cultural exact as it embraces the analogy of Indian classical music, the 'raag' to provoke the intricate emotions of the narrator Sandeep who is a young man studying at Oxford. This novel presents the narrator as an expatriate Bengali living in Oxford. His memory oscillates between his days in India and



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those in Oxford. The narrator's identity 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 cultural affiliation through geographical territory, because of cultural dissemination or dispersal of identities is the focal point of this novel. 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 goes 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).

Oxford is surrounded by the foreign students. Although there are touristy sites and descriptions of meetings in cafes and student rooms, there are surprising portraits of Cowley Road and non university areas which is habituated by Asian immigrants and the British Working class. The novel dispassionately recalls several years of the narrator's life a few friendships and affairs, and unexpected discoveries, such as the Covered Market near the college with its almost Indian Commercial activity, or sad bed-sits and houses off Cowley road. While at Oxford the narrator has male and two female friends and the novel is in part about the friendships with the



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women. Shehnaz , a thin, small –breasted, vegetarian post-graduate, is divorced and he meets her at a time when she is at the end of an affair. Mandira , an undergraduate, is depressive, who avoids taking her examinations, moves out off the campus , works part –time in the Covered Market, eventually returns home to her family on during vacation. Although there is little about the women beyond their time at oxford, we do learn that Sharma has worked his way up in the world from an impoverished rural village that lacked electricity to oxford university, where he is determined to improve his English, learn the classics and way of western thought, while cooking Indian food, playing games, and enjoying himself. He is more like the self-made hero of the western novel than the narrator, and is a version of the narrator's father, who has also moved from place to place and generally up in the world although he is now in decline.

The ways in which the portrayal of the ordinary and the dramatic, the local and the global, are placed in an almost vernacular relation with each other is specified not only by the 'foreignness' of this novel's main locale, but also through subdued reminders that this 'foreignness' has a spatial familiarity in individual and collective cultural histories relevant to the protagonist's character. It also reminds us that the definitions of the local are never absolute as are those of banality, even though often conceptualized universally. In other words, banality can only be correctly apprehended at the local level. This explicits cultural aspect through the diasporic frame.

The narrator of the novel physically situated in Oxford, often returns in his thoughts to back and forth—and more denotedly and, imaginatively. In an interview on belonging and of belonging accepts:

“I'm more interested in that kind of movement between two different worlds, this inner and outer, sometimes two incompatible cultural worlds which can be signified by the use of Shajana tree and Colgate toothpaste in the same sentence. So, that what I find has the movement of narrative” (161).



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Chaudhuri has depicted the protagonist homesickness in many places of the novel *Afternoon Raag*. Chaudhuri has portrayed about narrators longingness and remembrance of his native world, which can be seen in migration frame. The narrator's parents who lived in Bombay metropolis shifted to a lane in the Christian area in the outpost of Bombay. It was an ordered and clean flat that was smaller than the flats the narrator had lived in earlier all his life when his father worked in his company. The narrator observes:

The people, who really belonged to our lane were those who were on its margins –servants, sweepers, watchmen, hawkers of vegetable and fish who sent their cries out to the balconies and went with their baskets from door to door, even the beggars who, like the tradesmen, worked on a repeated route within a definite area. (240)

The narrator has delineated the features of Oxford, he first forecast on students who form the hub of academic life. He describes deliberately the dress-varieties of students:

Students dressed in the oddest of clothes, in secretive overcoats, in long and black primitive skirts, men with ear -rings, women wearing gypsy ornaments, would gather each morning for lectures, or pass in and out of doors recklessly with books clutched to their bosoms, or sit on the steps in abandonment, as if they had forgotten their appointments. (162)

As Oxford is still held in high esteem for its academic excellence, one feels privileged to be or to have been a student there. The narrator strikes a wistful note when he states: “How unique student life is, with its different rooms, its temporary enclosures and crystallizations, its awareness and memory of furniture and windows and spaces” (183). This explores a sociological code of highlighting the importance of cloths whereas in India it act as cultural modest, but in oxford its quite different where it seen as fashion. An additional charm and frame of the novel is the use of poetic language at places which transports the reader to an altogether different world in which the ordinary and extraordinary becomes distinctly.



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To conclude, in this novel, Chaudhuri's reflection towards cultural perspective is practically mapped in the frame of diasporic consciousness. It is quite evident from the above discussion of *Afternoon Raag* that Chaudhuri has captured the cultural ethos of three cities Oxford, Bombay and Calcutta. In between these, he has deliberately introduced the world of music and the enchantment it evokes. There are some fine patches describing the Rajasthani and north Indian culture, lending both novelty and variety of cultural fabric of India. However, what makes these remarkable is the author's ability to visualize and reminisce the minute cultural details of the local life which range from kitchen to college and finally to the cities mentioned above. An additional charm of the novel is the use of poetic language depicting culture at different places which transports the reader to an altogether different world in which the ordinary and extraordinary become one and indistinguishable.

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