

Tradition and Modernity: A Critical Study of Amit Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address*

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Abstract

The present paper makes a systematic and thematic analysis of Amit Chaudhuri's debut novel, A Strange and Sublime Address (1991). It expounds how far Amit Chaudhuri's modern outlook helps him to blend the tradition and modernity of India in his novels. Indeed, postmodern society emerged from a traditional society. Thus there is always a continuity that remains undercurrent that moves to modernity. This very fundamental idea can be explored in every novel of Amit Chaudhuri with critical acumens. Mainly, postmodern writers are distress over the loss of tradition in the modern society. Still they admit the present situation with a sense that it is the predicament of life in the present situation. They further accept that in the postmodern era man should hail the unavoidable changes with receptive soul in order to move further.

Key Words: *Tradition, Modernity, Modern Outlook, Postmodern Society, Globalization*

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Amit Chaudhuri obviously secures a stature in the legion of born-in-India writers who stormed the citadel of the Indian English fiction with the impetus of their brilliance, ability, and range. Yet, Amit Chaudhuri obviously varies from his peers. He is not like Salman Rushdie who never connected his writings to the fate of countries and Arundhati Roy who writes novels about caste and love. Rather he is on his own in writing the daily choruses of lives of India as well as abroad. He pens about the everyday and trivial incidents of life in admirable manner which other novelists normally fail to present in their writings. There is also a memorable composition of style, emotion, mood, and evocation which differentiated him from other Indian-born writers of this current millennium.

Amit Chaudhuri on his own admission is a novelist who fascinates in the development of the unpretentious details of day-to-day life specifically the unremarkable incidents that go broadly unseen and the uneventful affairs that hardly find place in a traditional novel. He has a special gift for perceiving the details in any normal situation and to transit them into the pages of his books with vigour and passion. Amit Chaudhuri prefers a narrative in which the myth, the folk, images and symbols of Indian subcontinent establish a seamless whole.

Amit Chaudhuri's debut novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991) makes a strange and sublime appeal to the inmost fibres of one's being with its raptly brilliant quality as Mandira Sen has observed in "Author at Work":

A Strange and Sublime Address is Indian writing in English with a difference and alters the prevailing pattern. The novella reveals no parody or depiction of alienation or even an explanation of the mysteries of another culture to the west. It is a celebration of childhood, an authentic record written in an astonishingly luminous and lyrical prose that never loses its perfect pitch nor stumbles into sentimentality. (8)

The novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address*, portrays the everyday lives of middle-class people of the eastern part of India especially Kolkata. The novel opens with the influx of the child protagonist, Sandeep to his maternal uncle's home in Kolkata to spend his summer holidays. As a child of postmodern time, Amit Chaudhuri juxtaposes the simple conventional life Kolkata and the busy modern life of Mumbai in this novel with immediate execution. The metropolitans, Kolkata and Mumbai can be regarded as microcosm for the change or growth that the other places of India would experience. It is the time, at which globalization and computerization competed

with each other to excel in the Indian socio-political sphere. Indeed India gives way for both the factors and welcomed both for its fast evolving stages.

In this aspect, *A Strange and Sublime Address* can be regarded as a postmodern fiction which presents the fast changing image of India. The novel can also be regarded as a children's tale as it provides the details of the children's world as well as the elders' world from children's perspective. *A Strange and Sublime Address* portrays the realm of children sans the postmodern factors called magic-realism otherwise it is a postmodern novel because it is built on the factor called realism in microscopic details.

Sandeep's to Kolkata and his everyday experiences in the city make him remember the incidents and events forever and ever. When he comes to his maternal uncle, Chhotomama's house in Kolkata, his cousins Abhi and Babla are playing on the iron-gate. Mamima, Sandeep's uncle's wife, receives them but the two boys run into the house on seeing the newcomers. Sandeep's mother presents the gifts to Abhi, Babla and she presents Mamima saris, though Kolkata saris are famous all over India. Mamima, still says that the saris brought from Mumbai are so appealing. Sandeep, surely becomes acquaintance with the two boy. They relish the company of one another. Sandeep is unwilling for the old house, old furniture and the middle-class life of the house in the beginning. But instantaneously he begins to like them. The young psyche of Sandeep correlates his modern house in Mumbai and the conventional house in Kolkata and that makes a sort of nostalgia for his Chhotomama's house in him. He loves the surroundings of Chhotomama's house in Kolkata.

Sandeep, after accommodating himself with the household of his uncle begins to enjoy the household choruses done by Mamima, servant-maids namely Saraswathi and Chhaya. Sandeep loves the mustard-oil massage and the subsequent cool-water bath done on him by the maid-servant. Even he compares the washing done by hand and the 'shhhh' sound of Saraswathi to the washing done by the washing-machine of his Mumbai flat. Indeed, Sandeep is the author's character who lauds tradition. The aroma of the mustard oil makes Amit Chaudhuri to commemorate his own childhood-days spent in Bengal amidst its culture. So he pens in *A Strange and Sublime Address*:

...In Bengal, both tamarind and babies are soaked in mustard-oil, and then left upon a mat on the terrace to absorb the morning sun. The tamarind is left out till it dries up and shrivels into an inimitable flavor and a ripe old age; but the babies are brought in before it gets too hot, and then bathed in cool water. (8)

India is exceptional for its variety of foods. The different varieties of food

rely on the different climate, different places, traditions, and the social environments of the people in India. In Bengal, household rice with fish is the day-to-day food. The different shapes of spoons and spatulas are used for various food-stuffs to be served. Even the shapes of spatulas are exclusive to India.

In a detailed manner, Amit Chaudhuri illustrates the food-stuff of Bengali household to make the non-Bengali readers understand the available food-stuff of the place. In this aspect, it works as a guide-book for the people who want to visit Kolkata. He highlights the picture not only the evolution that occurs in the metropolitans but also the accumulation of dust and garbage with meaningful details in *A Strange and Sublime Address*. As a nature-lover, he has environmental consciousness while reviewing the dusty city. Though the tale is narrated from a child's perspective, he periodically intervenes and from a postmodernist viewpoint criticizes the polluted metropolis, Kolkata. The development of industry and the modernization of the city forced the city to become polluted.

Amit Chaudhuri is contemptuous while criticizing the polluted city; however the tone is mild and sarcastic. He makes a comparison of modern art to that of the polluted city. Both the modern art and modern polluted city look alike for him. In modern art one can see different colours just blown on the entire surface of the picture to give it a shape-like appearance. Like this the dust formed on the articles gives them modern art like appearance.

Amit Chaudhuri is inspired and fascinated by the myth of the old Bengal and its culture. He never misses a chance to highlight the image of Kolkata in all his works. He depicts the middle-class life of Kolkata of 1980s accurately with its flavour and colour. The cricket commentary, film songs, radio-broadcasting news, screening of films in the open space with the help of a projector; fireflies flying in the field emitting light, old Ambassador car which could be regarded as a prestigious possession, household having two servant-maids, no freedom given to children for their choices, spending Sunday evenings in relaxed manner by making small round trip around the city in an old Ambassador car, and the head of the family seemingly the father who alone is toiling for the sake of the whole family and for which he is given all significance by the family members are some of the attitudes and events that occur in every middle-class family of Kolkata.

Sandeep mocks at his uncle when he makes all kinds of hassle while he is getting ready to go to office. Chhotomama with conventional lifestyle looks like other Indian middle-class men of 1980s and for Sandeep he is a prototype figure from whom he enjoys fatherly caring and guidance. Sandeep has an admiration for Chhotomama who takes magazine into the restroom and reads, sings songs while

bathing, and becomes emotional when speaking about Subash Chandara Bose, Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian political structure. Most importantly Sandeep has so much admiration for Chhotomama who interplays with children and directs them even in frivolous matters. Chhotomama though makes all kinds of hassle while getting ready himself to go to office, for Sandeep he looks both heroic and comic at the same time. This peculiar attitude in Chhotomama fascinates Sandeep who aspires to become a writer in future.

Amit Chaudhuri expounds expressively in *A Strange and Sublime Address* how the middle-class people spend their evenings. The neighbours of Chhotomama's houses come alive when Sandeep and his cousins watch the neighbours from the veranda of their house. The elders of every house gather in the balcony in the evenings. Even the widows in white saris and housewives with their children join themselves in the balconies. One such moment Sandeep and his cousins happen to watch the two unmarried sister of twenty-five year old nicknamed as "Cinderella's Ugly Sisters" come on to the balcony of their house. On watching the sisters others make a comment that they are unmarried till the age of twenty-five, hence they are nicknamed as "Cinderella's Ugly Sisters." Poking nose into others' business is one of the features of middle-class people in India.

Amit Chaudhuri has a bent of traditional mind. Hence he portrays traditional activities like singing Hindustani and dancing traditional dances of India like bharathanatyam, kuchipadi and kathak enthusiastically in all his woks. In *A Strange and Sublime Address*, he expounds conventional way of doing daily prayer by Sandeep's aunty with accurate details. In the prayer room one can discover the portraits of gods and goddesses of Shiva, Krishna with his flute, Saraswati playing Veena eternally and delicately, Lakshmi accompanied by her mascot, Ganesh with his whimsical elephant-head and Durga certainly they are the gods and goddesses of Hindu religion. Sandeep's aunty after having bath goes into the prayer-room and performs pooja. The traditional way of performing pooja in Hindu families of Kolkata is highlighted by Amit Chaudhuri with a comprehensive portrayal.

As a modernist, Amit Chaudhuri has a social consideration for Indian society. Being an Indian he is truly Indian in his nerve and blood. He contemptuously criticises the society specifically the lower-class people and their illiterate behaviour in their every attitude. Once the sweeper of Chhotomama's house comes and asks excuse himself for not coming for work for the past two days. When he is inquired, he tells that his wife delivered his fourth baby two days before. Hearing this Sandeep's mother advises him to stop with four children.

A Strange and Sublime Address is standing witness to the tradition of North

Bengal and a document of its particularity and uniqueness. Sandeep's instinctive and acute love for culture is flowed out from his heart when he enjoys life in Chhotomama's house. The things and events in his uncle's house bear the conventional marks on them. The novel is poetic. It represents not only poesy of passions but also the poesy of everyday life. It affirms how even day-to-day life, ordinary things can be interesting. Everything, whether it is insignificant, ordinary and automated is expounded through images, which may be sometimes bizarre and delightful or sometimes unbelievable or sometimes satiric and ironic but always poetic in their suggestiveness, evocativeness and intensity.

When the novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address*, is read, one may discover that he is moved between two worlds namely the world of images, colours, sounds, cadences and rhythms and the world of poetry. It appears to the reader that he is fixed to the earth securely while his head is floating in the clouds. Amit Chaudhuri in his first novel indeed has created the borderlines between the novel and poetry and makes his novel what is called, 'strange and sublime.'

Amit Chaudhuri is extremely painful while saying the changes that occurred in Indian traditional system because of the interferences of many foreign invasions and westerners' entry and the arrival of western education. He believes that the traditional values have been degenerating day-by-day due to these many influences. Globalization is also one of the causes that amplified the loss of traditional values in India. Now the modern India in a secular vein begins questioning the traditional values. Here, Amit Chaudhuri demarcates a line between tradition and superstition and firmly thinks that the superstitious beliefs of India must be questioned but not the traditional values.

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