

## Microscopic Specifics of Local Culture: An Analysis of Amit Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address*

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**Abstract :** *The present paper analyses A Strange and Sublime Address of Amit Chaudhuri in terms of its distinct focus on cultural spaces. For that reason, the focal point of critical attention in this chapter is fixed on A Strange and Sublime Address which recounts social change through the portrayal of local cultures and socio-cultural facets of life. The novel emphatically proclaims Chaudhuri's intense interest in and commitment with the cultural places, both domestic and public. The novel, A Strange and Sublime Address, recounts the social transformations through the portrayal of local histories and socio-cultural features of life. The story is told by a ten-year old boy, Sandeep and the whole novel with its events and characters can be viewed from the view of a boy. Chaudhuri implores the world of children with their mischievousness, innocence, acute observation and mischief. He has interpreted the life, attitude and interplays of the adults and counterpoised them with those of children. The metropolis of Calcutta and Bombay alternate to give an outlook of life in them as the writer has strongly documented their cultural spirits.*

**Keywords:** *Cultural Spaces, Social Changes, Cultural Spirits, Social Transformations*

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Amit Chaudhuri is a most productive author who has triumphantly written in several genres. His artistic genius has strongly dealt with short-stories, poetry, memoir, essays and literary criticism inclusive of novels. With his inclination for modernism Chaudhuri is engrossed in the shift between two different worlds – inner and outer. He has written about two or more contradictory cultural worlds in a strain of genres. His lyrical prose is surprisingly well-suited to provoking the cryptic metropolis, Mumbai. He has purposely captured the microscopic details of local culture and its different spaces: streets, houses, city, people, and the mural. His ardent perception of the ordinary things, details, events, and people has an artistic and appealing trait about it. The smells, sights, and sounds look as patches but inspire the portrayal, which substantiates the writer's proficiency to illustrate the local culture in its multiple dimensions.

Chaudhuri's debut novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address* makes a strange and sublime overture to the innermost fibres of one's being with its rapturously brilliant feature as Mandira Sen has pointed out 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)

This novel depicts the lives of the middle-class Kolkata and its industrial and economic depression but with its strange cultural aura through the eyes of its twelve-year protagonist, Sandeep, who comes from Mumbai to enjoy his holidays. He views that Kolkata acquires a quaint magic that is evidently absent in the faster paced Mumbai.

*A Strange and Sublime Address* is divided into two parts. The first is the world of children and their horseplay, and the second part is the world of elders especially when Sandeep's uncle accidentally suffers heart-attack and the arrival of relatives from the neighbouring hamlets of Kolkata. The world of elders is depicted from Sandeep's perspective. As there is no beginning, middle or end, the novel shares the elements of the postmodern feature of fragmented narrative. Rather than providing facile generalisations about *A Strange and Sublime Address*, it would be precise to discuss expressly about the cultural spaces possessed by the characters. The novel

apparently proclaims the local cultures and individualities and features the importance of the middle-class life in Bengal, specifically in Kolkata.

*A Strange and Sublime Address* captures middle-class Kolkata, a metropolis of industrial and economic depression but with the rare cultural flavour, viewed through the eyes of Sandeep. He resides with his parents in Mumbai in a multi-storeyed apartment - twenty-third floor of a twenty-five floor building. Once a year during the summer, he visits Kolkata with his mother and sojourns at the residence of his maternal uncle. Compared to Mumbai, it is totally a different world. With an excitement of wonderment, he cherishes this new world, the surroundings in Kolkata and the adjacent localities.

Along with Kolkata, Mumbai also infers as the symbol of disconcerting modernity. Mumbai serves as a fitting contrast. The probability of a concept of Indianness conceived on the differences within the culture sounds to Chaudhuri quite often an inadequacy, leading to a sense of disorienting loss. Every account of *A Strange and Sublime Address* has its fitting place. The conjuration of a child's world-view evidently affirms the writer's commitment with the base and origins of human life, and by extension, a vision of innocence, purified by adult choices and attitudes. The local people provide a recollection of nostalgia which is concurrently led by a sense of dislocation and a sense of loss.

It seems to be an autobiographical streak in the novel inasmuch as Sandeep bears adequate resemblance to the own childhood days of Chaudhuri. Sandeep cherishes not only the credulous joys of childhood — eating, bathing, sleeping, and exploring the town. Simultaneously, the novel brings to light the personal concern of living, working, and social interplay and subsequent adjustments and accommodations. The life in Bombay is well-organized, mechanical, and lonesome. In contrast, Kolkata is featured by a cheerful and spirited local culture, and a sense of community-life, togetherness.

The novel has two themes — simple pleasures of childhood and the evocation of a lifestyle — themes which are inevitably connected together. A simple act as a family having a lunch in their own house brings in excitement and a new meaning in the lyrical prose of Chaudhuri. It is substantial to mention that Bengalis are very particular about their food and eating-styles. Several varieties of food cooked from the same ingredients convey abundance of the inventiveness of Bengali food which is generally supposed to chiefly rest on rice and fish.

Chaudhuri manages to present the subjectiveness of the Bengali culture through the behaviour and interplay of the characters in *A Strange and Sublime Address*. To illustrate this, one should move from the general to the particular

description of a character like Chhotomama. He is a fine example of a local subject which is an important determinant in tracing the cultural spaces. His temperament towards political regionalism becomes settled in his comic and incoherent behaviour for he forgets at the moment that he is speaking to young boys, who are shorn of any political adherence.

Chaudhuri's novels place a relatively absolute insistence on such spaces which have been marginalized by predominant historiographies. Furthermore, such spaces do not have a mirror to these historiographies. Such spaces, indeed, create the significant site of the production and cultivation of the common people in his fiction which entwine the real texture of locality.

The local culture is projected as different from the prevalent ethnic culture, still remaining a portion of it: *A Strange and Sublime Address* appears to cite space for the local culture as a feasible alternate for the complicated relationship between the private and the public in the context of the cultural realities of post-independent India. *A Strange and Sublime Address* is filled with cultural spaces which are presented in minute details. Chaudhuri comprises characters, houses, the city, rituals, customs and social interplay. He seems to recognise with the ten-year boy Sandeep and tells the story from his viewpoint. Accordingly speaking, the novel has a thin plot and moves ahead on the basis of the memories of Sandeep which move around day-to-day incidents and daily life. As Chaudhuri himself admits in a very ingenious manner that there is not a storyline in the novel when he makes a remark about the portrayal of some houses in streets.

With all modesty, Chaudhuri keeps away from direct authorial interference and lets Sandeep tell the story. The domestic space is a significant site of culture. The depiction of Chhotomama's house, the way it is swabbed, the puja-rooms, and the depiction of other houses in Kolkata which are very close to each other, have all been carried out in remarkable acumen and detail. Chaudhuri foregrounds the insight of local language, Bengali as a cultural artefact, but in this too, he is humorous. For example, Sandeep's incapability of reading Bengali becomes a comical incident, as he sees the letters as characters in both the senses of the word. Not only the Bengali language but English is also subjected to sarcasm in the novel.

Chaudhuri adopts sarcasm as a means to articulate circumstances in a sarcastic manner with an earnestness underlying it. Abhi's instructor is a source of fun and hilarity to the children. His English is horrible though he teaches Abhi English. Chaudhuri appears to ridicule him when he asserts that it is delightful to hear his instinctive fluency and mastery in Bengali after his bold guerrilla invasion into the rugged province of English. Chhotomama's heart-attack becomes a chance for

criticising the society. His friends and relatives see him in hospital but end up debating about their children, relatives still sit talking, sipping now and then from a flask, eating dry crunchy sweets from paper containers, shawls around their shoulders as if it were a picnic in a hill-station. Among the visitors, there are people who even ruminated whether Chhotomama has any chance of survival.

*A Strange and Sublime Address* is profoundly sprinkled with the depiction of cultural spaces. Kolkata figures as a place of outer space and the Chaudhuri knowledge of Kolkata seems to be very vibrant. He proposes that one may enjoy a Sunday evening in Kolkata in several ways; for example, one should drive-in to Outram Ghat, have a ramble at the bank of river Hooghly, could stay home and listen to plays on radio or watch a cinema. There is an incident which apparently presents how the Bengali family members behave in certain circumstances. For example, the comical scene of Chhotomama's effort to take out his car highlights the middle-class dream to own a car.

The whole situation is so humorous that one can seldom put down laughter. Chhotomama is sitting at the steering of the old Ambassador, one arm coolly dangling outside, one arm on the steering. They (middlemen) take position, like a mini battalion — two at the back, two by the window, and another reserve, who would do the necessary duty of shouting from the back. At the words of Chhotomama, the team moved forward and the uncontrollable car, after some impassive silent thought, determined to concede a few feet into the road.

Furthermore, the act of sitting in the car also means the anxiety and pressure of the family members to occupy the car. The congested space of the car may be taken as an analogue of the domestic space in the local culture. Relatively, all the family members get crushed into the car. The way Chaudhuri correlates this situation to a stuffed lunch-box produces plenty of humour. The simple act of blowing the conch in the puja-room happens as an important cultural ritual. Bengali poetry and music also acquire a prominent position in Bengali culture. Chhotomama's singing songs in the bathroom shows Bengalis' passion for music. And Bengali poetry is also resonant and musical though Sandeep finds little chance to learn either poetry or music.

The narration of the story shifts to first person from third-person after the hundred and thirtieth page as Sandeep transforms to manhood from a boy. Now Sandeep recounts the several incidents connected to his life. Through his perspective, readers view a different picture of Kolkata which has changed a lot in these years. After finishing his higher studies at Oxford, Sandeep has returned to Kolkata as his parents have moved from Mumbai to Kolkata. At his grownup stage, he sees things

differently with a new perception.

*A Strange and Sublime Address* is momentous for the portrayal of the local culture, which is epitomised by the depiction of the local, familiar spaces, people, their behaviour, and experiences. The novel which opens with a boy seeing ends with a mask that mentions the fleeting nature of the vision. The scene with the kokil further makes the reader curious, cautious, and a little startled. The bird's food is specifically inquisitive as we learn that only in a month, the gulmohur trees would delve into fierce orange flowers, in an undifferentiated trembling orange mass, with the impact of a volcano erupting and balancing, instantly.

Chaudhuri creates a deeply sensuous world that goes beyond the postcolonial dichotomies of the local and global; native and foreign; and West and East. His local domiciles are located in connection to a broader world-view. Thus Chaudhuri has tried to create a home for man, rather than to be only creating a national literature. The day-to-day life, the specific, and the local become, in this idea of culture, facets of that making. The Kolkata comes alive with its sounds and sights, its gastronomic pleasures. The interplays of characters are real rather than realistic.

In attempting to trace the cultural affinities in his fiction, Chaudhuri competently clears a space for himself as a compassionate creative writer who tinkers in both modernism and realism. Majority of his writings emerge as seeds of his greater fictional creations. Home, family, belonging, and relationships establish the private spaces and necessary sites of culture, specifically the middle-class which finds best representation in his novels.

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