



Vision of Life in Amit Chaudhuri's Novels

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ABSTRACT

This work deals with the discussion about the novels of Amit Chaudhuri. The pleasures of Chaudhuri's writing lie in the absolute clarity of his phrasing, the perfectly mimicked rhythm of a conversation and, above all, his spare and truthful rendering of the subtle mechanics of close human relationships.

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Introduction

Amit Chaudhuri was born in Calcutta in 1962 and brought up in Bombay. He graduated from University College in London and was a research student at Balliol College, Oxford. He was later Creative Arts Fellow at Wolfston College, Oxford. He received the Harper Wood Studentship for English Literature and poetry from St. Johns College, Cambridge. He has contributed fiction, poetry and reviews to numerous publications including, *The Guardian*, *The London Review of Books*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The New Yorker* and *Granta Magazine*.

Human life is concerned with the description and explication of age related behavioural changes from birth to death. When a serious novelist takes up a particular stand point or views objects from a particular angle, it generally reflects some innate necessity to do so. The focus given to ordinary experiences of life, the pre-occupation with the small and the trivial, the movement away from the grand and the heroic is a common practice of the modern age.

According to Sri Kaanta Dash, the meaning of life differs from one person to another, from day-to-day and from hour to hour. Each situation in life represents a challenge to the person and presents a problem for him/ her to solve. The meaning of life for an individual is unique and specific, in that, it must and can be attained or fulfilled by him/her alone. Only then does it achieve a significance, which will satisfy his/her own wish to meaning. The true meaning of life is to be discovered in relation to the world, rather than with his/her own psyche, as though it were a closed system (112 -113).

Observation takes place in psychological research. This refers to where the observation is made, whether in nature in a free environment, in which the person or the animal usually lives, or in a restricted environment such as in a school, hospital or laboratory or house. A person could carry the restriction of his observation further by paying strict attention to only one aspect of that vision. Attention is, therefore, not a thing or a power that makes selection possible. It is the process of selection itself. The importance of the motives, interest and aspirations make up the vision of life.

The famous writer Anita Desai's *Cosmic Vision* interlinks time and memory together for an integrated vision of life. To recollect the past memories is to link the unconscious and the conscious state of the mind. The psychological merger of the times in a flux creates a vision of wholeness. Her novels find an obsessive involvement with the character's past as key to their consciousness of their life.

Upamanuyu Chatterjee focuses on the immense boredom of everyday life. He shows how the routine jobs become mechanical and have a lack-lustre effect. In his English, August he shows Agastya visualizing his day:

Tonic's office was about fifteen kilometers away from home. At a red light he decided [...] that he wasn't going to do the journey everyday [...]. A bus overtook him, with office-goers hanging out of the door like tongues out of canine mouths. I'd be one of them [...] rushing for a bus, lunch packet or tiffin carrier in hand, he'd queue up sweating at the bus stop, but stand all the way, in the stench of engine oil, bus sweat [...] (168).

Amit Chaudhuri's novels are extraordinary for his power of observing and recording the elusive details of our daily life. All other novelists have concentrated on the common occurrences of life and have delineated their experiences from diverse angles. For example, Gabriel Garcia Marquez explicates 'daily life' with the help of 'fantasy and fable'. Some other writers like Salman Rushdie, have used history, fable and fairytale, interspersed with intense realism. Yet others have used psychology and psycho-analytical theories as their background.

Amit Chaudhuri's novels can be seen as an attempt to represent the placid, happy surface of life's complicated patterns. The broad general framework without the short lived moments would be meaningless, as Amit Chaudhuri's points out in his *A Strange and Sublime Address*: "Anyone can tell a sad story two estranged lovers, a man who lost a leg or a life, a child who lost his parents. But it's difficult to tell a happy story" (159).

In this novel *strange and Sublime Address* Amit Chaudhuri depicts a vivid picture of Calcutta life such as, the summer climate, power cuts, the daily puja of the household

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deity, the hustle and the bustle of city life. This gives the readers a clear idea about a typical middle class household in Calcutta. Amit Chaudhuri observes the roads, buildings, houses of Calcutta and describes the city graphically:

Calcutta is a city of dust. If one walks down the street, one sees mounds of dust like sand-dunes on the pavements, on which children and dogs sit doing nothing, while sweating labourers dig into the macadam with spades and drills. The roads are always being dug up, partly to construct the new underground railway system [...]. Calcutta is like a work of modern art that neither makes sense nor has utility, but exists for some esoteric aesthetic reason (8).

Like Vikram Seth and Amitav Ghosh, Chaudhuri's writing demonstrates a singularly mature and sagacious vision. With dexterous skill Amit Chaudhuri recreates in the novel simple pleasures of the children bathing, eating, playing, shopping, watching the adults routine, rituals, household chores and sleeping.

In the city of Calcutta, now internationally known for its shabbiness, a shabby house in a shabby locality reveals itself as Strange and Sublime, for this temporary abode alone offers the permanence of root to the protagonist Sandeep. In the immaculate and shining perfection of Sandeep's father's twenty third floor modern apartment in Bombay, he feels threatened by his lonely prominence, whereas, in Chhota mama's old and unkempt house in Calcutta, with its spider webs in the corner, the portraits of grandparents on the wall, ceiling fan swinging erratically, he is filled with a sense of security. The company of cousins and uncles, aunt and grandaunt, the sights and sounds of life coming from outside through the open windows make him feel free. As he listens to the inconsequential chatter of his mother and Chhota mama's, their shared background of brother and sister, holds an unstated communion commented in the native language and envelops him with a sense of security and comfort like a shade of the cool expansive branches of a rooted banyan tree. Again, the reality of Indian political and economic structure, which assumes individual displacement across the subcontinent as natural and inevitable, this shade, this experience of belonging, can only be temporary, and this fact makes every moment justifiably very precious. Here, the absence of story is utilized to accommodate an unpleasant contemporary reality.

The momentary, the transient is exploited with all the potential of symbolist interchange of sense experiences fully explored. With whimsical humour born of understanding, the novelist describes the mundane activities of Chhota mama:

Later, he would enter the toilet, armed with an ashtray, a newspaper and a pair of reading-glasses. The toilet was his study. Here [...] he read the significant news of the day; he pondered on 'world affairs' and 'home affairs'; he pontificated to himself on the 'current situation' from a Marxist angle. He was a water-closet thinker (52).

When Chhota mama sings, in the bathroom, the notes echo "in the four enclosing walls like rays of trapped light darting this way and that in a crystal, a diamond" (52 - 53). Here Chaudhuri not only gives a beautiful description, but also lets the reader see the political leanings and personal habits of Chhota mama and also the sense of importance Chhota mama attributes to the everyday tasks, which contrast with the weighty words used for describing them, with the punctuation emphasizing the author's stand.

The banal and random occurrences possess a depth of life under the surface. The human interaction too, behind their peripheral and tangential facade, reveal a deep commitment, a

set of profound values. In the stories also, brief and apparently inconsequential encounters with astrologers, servants, plumbers, electricians and distant uncles, take place with the normal quota of chicanery, inefficiency and escapism.

The person who draws the major share of Sandeep's attention is his uncle Chhota mama, head of the household, a quintessential Bengali. He is the unstated contrast between Sandeep's own father, one of the Bengali: who have made it to the top and Chhota mama who obviously has not, renders the nephew uncle relationship very poignant. It is he who supplies the male child's role, functions as the foster father, because he provides the boy with the anchor he longs for. His idiosyncrasies and prejudices, passions and emotions, defects and failures are so steeped in Bengali, that he seems to represent a whole generation. Despite the cynical attitude of the elders towards Chhota mama, to Sandeep and his two boys, he is a beloved hero of some unknown thriller, constantly harassed by villains, cheats and two timers.

There is no sentimental nostalgia in the delineation of persons or their actions. The proverbial underdog, virtuous and oppressed, is presented as dominating, cunning, greedy and inefficient but not malicious. Adults are neutral, never idealized or denounced. Chhota mama with black, wet hair sticking out and a towel wrapped in the middle, looks like "the chieftain of some undiscovered, happy African tribe" (55), comes out of the bathroom smiling, for he had performed "his last sacrosanct ritual and offered his songs of the day [...]" (55). The ordinary is lifted out of the ordinariness, the style makes it clear that the sublime is reached with a touch of irony.

Amit Chaudhuri has a sharp eye for observations. He notes every detail minutely and records it loyally. There is a tone of leisurely observation in his description of people and their occupation in the evening :

In the evenings, people came out on the balconies in the lane; widows in white saris, housewives with children in their arms. The men returned home, slowly. Sandeep and his cousins sat on cane stools on the verandah, watching the balconies on the opposite side, each with its own characters, its own episodes (18).

Even the routine tea-serving activity of Sandeep's aunt becomes an occasion for detailed observation and description. It takes a ritualistic tone:

She set the tray on the floor of the verandah, which had just been swept clean by Chhaya; then she bent her knees, slowly lowering her body, and sat down on the floor herself. She was most comfortable on the newly cleaned floor, her bright red and blue sari thickening around her, crumpling into several folds, her hands moving carefully through the minor storm of her garments as she served the sweetmeats. Her legs, like two romantic, indefinite paths on a mountainside, were lost in her sari's vast landscape [...] (21).

The same attention to detail, coupled with a sense of wonder, is evident when he talks of the faceless crowds that lined up to pay homage to Rabindarnath Tagore:

Thousands, without name or face, but known perhaps to one other person somewhere else, appeared and disappeared around the body of the dead poet held aloft, indistinguishable from each other, weaving in and out of that moment. (Afternoon Ragg, 88)

In the novel *A Strange and Sublime Address*, the random happenings do not offer a rationale of continuity of exterior events leading to a planned conclusion. There is no revelation, no earth shattering change in any of the characters and life

continues as usual. Chaudhuri observes the ordinary incidents through his characters. He describes the three sisters who were known as Cinderella's Ugly Sisters though "none of them were ugly". A teacher and his wife lived in the house exactly opposite. They had a son who belonged to that "despicable species called the all-rounder". They also had a daughter who danced funnily "beating a rhythm on the floor with her foot and never managing to do it in perfect measure". Untidy, but regular activity continues on the pavement. Some girls played hopscotch; boys sat on the ground shooting marbles (18-19).

Even trifling incidents assume importance in Chaudhuri's vision and not only throw light on the characters but they also provide glimpses of the daily activities of people. In the afternoon Sandeep's parents and relatives would be asleep. Sandeep and his cousins often looked through the shutters of the closed window, to the lane outside. It was possible, on certain moments, for Abhi and Sandeep and his cousins to call out to a dazed passer by, "Eh, stupid!" or "Faster, fat man!" and close the shutter and become invisible (28).

Amit Chaudhuri unfolds these small episodes in a way that reveals his obvious interest in them; and not simply interest, but absorption. The endless stream of activity that goes on around in the world has been caught by him vividly and memorably. It reminds one of the kind of experimentation that the "Stream of Consciousness" novelists carried on with the human consciousness quite a few decades ago. Human consciousness also carries within it much that is familiar, irrelevant and insignificant. But revealing it, to its last details, had given birth to a fascinating form that is very much relevant in our present day context.

Amit Chaudhuri's method also has something of that thoroughness and intensity, the accuracy and deliberateness that is quite striking. He has gone on to explore the numerous ordinary details in a manner that points to a new way of looking at life. This becomes clear, when, towards the middle of the novel, we come across a passage, which is significant from the point of view of novelistic techniques:

[...] why did these houses seem to suggest that an infinitely interesting story might be woven around them? And yet the story would never be a satisfying one, because the writer, like Sandeep, would be too caught up in jotting down the irrelevances and digressions that make up lives, and the life of a city, rather than a good story- till the reader would shout 'Come to the point!' - and there would be no point, except the girl memorising the rules of grammar, the old man in the easy-chair fanning himself, and the house with the small, empty porch that was crowded, paradoxically, with many memories and possibilities (57-58).

The bourgeoisie-like neighbour of Chhoto mama, pursues that elusive dream called success, 'future' and 'career'. It is a habitat where the species of Chhoto mama is under considerable threat. So his affairs gradually worsen; Sandeep's own father goes further up in the corporate ladder, with an even more spacious apartment on the twenty fifth floor of a twenty five storeyed building. His father, with his executive efficiency, takes charge when Chhoto mama suffers a heart attack. The objective reality, however unpalatable, is never undermined. At the same time the bitterness and frustration which characterize the modern attitude is replaced by a positive faith discovering the inexhaustible spring of life in the creative abundance of nature and man. "The real story with its beginning, middle and conclusion, would never be told, because it did not exist" (qtd. in Dey, 104).

Obviously, the author is anchored in post modern aesthetics. Hence the detailed description of objects like wooden box, horse, dining-table, double-bed-cot or fans and cars join the characters in creating a way of life.

In the novel *Afternoon Raag*, the title and its contents, along with the opening poem in honour of Chaudhuri's music teacher celebrate the various moods that the different ragas induce in the listeners at different times of the day and night. Chaudhuri has an insider's experience and knowledge of Indian classical music. The experience is expressed eloquently in the dedicatory poem to his teacher, comparable in its imaginative depth to Wallace Steven's poem, "Peter Quince at the Clavier," except that Chaudhuri's poem, like his prose, is transparent in its style. His knowledge is demonstrated from the manner in which he expounds the range of sounds produced by the harmonium, the tabla and tanpura. He contrasts the finality of musical notation in western music with the impermanence of Indian music, which is only performed. "Each singer has its own impermanent long hand with its own arching, idiosyncratic beauties, its own repetitive, serpentine letters" (29).

The raag is played in the evening and the whole novel rests on the gradual unfolding of the narrators love for music, his first music lessons with his guru Govind Jaipurwale, his guru's expert rendering of the different raags, the names of the different raags, and the hours allocated for the narrator to play the music on the tanpura. The ultimate impression left by the novel is one of a fine tone in which, different places and people intermingle memories with musings, hopes and desires with dream and disenchantment. It is the underlying pattern of the music analogy that allows the author to mix Oxford with India, a place of rain and mist with a sunny warm country, the city of Bombay with the city of Calcutta and both with Rajputana and Vrindaban. In this novel that fluidity that it achieves through the Vaishnava devotional songs in the language of Bengal, which Tagore made famous, is largely due to the contribution of this song metaphor. It allows the structure of the novel to achieve a cyclical pattern. The unfolding of a raag, beginning with the sama, the rhythmic voyages through different notes, and then again the return to the starting point this is the pattern of *Afternoon Raag*. Each individual, each incident, each location gets merged into this grand sweep, losing its individual distinction, emerging ultimately as a vast musical crescendo. The whole thing is deliberately underplayed, the dramatic elements kept intentionally out of focus, the comic and the natural always neutralising the extraordinary and the exceptional.

In Amit Chaudhuri's description, Oxford itself is a character in this novel, for it is not just a town where the students come to study and go away after a certain period of time:

[...] the students do not really matter, because within the college walls there is a world - a geography and a weather - that clings to its own time and definition and is changed by no one. In this world, glimpsed briefly by the passerby through the open doorway [...] the students, with their nationalities and individual features, their different voices and accents, their different habits and attempts at adjustments [...] seem blurred, colourful, accidental, even touching, but constantly skirting the edge of his vision, while it is possible to clearly and unequivocally recall the dignity and silence of the doorway and the world beyond it (75).

In Oxford, the relationship the students try to establish with each other is charged with the feeling of suppressed

anxiety and loneliness. They are filled with the sense that after the period of social intercourse, lectures and studying at libraries, everything will fade when they complete their degrees. At such moments one knows, "that one has no existence for oneself, except in their absence" (67). The consciousness of being 'in transit' remains, that all the characters and events only help one to feel the tangibility of the situation, which otherwise, would melt into a dream. In the novel he describes his second day at Oxford, the narrator recalls vividly the interchange of fantasy and reality:

That was my second day. Even then, Shenaz and Mandira were waiting to happen to me, for the rain and lack of sunlight had already entered me, from which I would create, inevitably, wisps of fantasy and desire that would later become flesh and bones and blood capable of breaking the heart, becoming one's own, and then, after a year, again changing into rain and grey light (126).

The characters are treated as things. Shenaz and Mandira are 'things' that are going to happen to the author, wisps of fantasy that are being woven into him. They hardly appear as humans, solid beings with identities and individualities but airy substance, ready to melt into "rain and grey light". This kind of interchange of dream and tangible existence is a part of the novelist's method as far as Oxford is concerned. Chaudhuri never wishes to over-emphasize emotional tangles.

The intangibility of Oxford is placed against the solid background of India. Amit Chaudhuri describes a time when his "father used to work in the city and we lived in a flat in Malabar Hill overlooking the Arabian sea" (qtd in Bose, 103). Imperceptibly, there is a switch to the past, where he recollects a few childhood events and then there is a journey back to the present. Time is fluid here and the past and the present gently merge, creating the atmosphere suitable to hold the musical analogy that runs throughout the novel.

The references to music are interspersed with small anecdotes of the past, the small pleasures of day-to-day life, such as the pleasure the protagonist's mother and her friend Chittrakaki feel when exploring together the South Indian cafe where paper dosas would be served. Then Chaudhuri returns once more to the present to talk about Mohan and Sohanlal, the relatives of his music teacher, and who played the tabla and harmonium respectively, to give the proper accompaniment to his Guru.

In Oxford, the protagonist's friend Sharma, comes straight from a village to the University. He puts up calendars with coloured pictures of Hindu goddesses on the walls of his room at Oxford. The narrator observes: "The choices that existed in my world between clinging to my Indianness, or letting it go, between being nostalgic or looking toward the future did not exist in his" (129).

The reader can be in no doubt about the choice that Chaudhuri makes. Chaudhuri clearly brings out the past memories and present impressions, which are all mixed together like the mingling of different musical notes and the reader gets a time-frame that beautifully corresponds to the tunes referred to in the novel. Chaudhuri's past memories filled him with memorable events and he portrayed them through his characters, as when he tells about his mother:

Early mornings, my mother is about, drifting in her pale nightie, making herself a cup of tea in the kitchen. Water begins to boil in the kettle; it starts as a private, secluded sound, pure as rain, and grows to a steady, solipsistic bubbling [...]. Even at three o'clock in the morning one might hear her eating a Marie biscuit in the kitchen [...]. [Later], my mother

will settle on the rug and unclip the bellows [of the harmonium], pulling and pushing them with a mild aquatic motion with her left hand, the fingers of the right hand flowering upon the keys, the wedding bangle suspended around her wrist (15-19).

Afternoon Raag is a very different kind of a novel. There is a kind of brooding stateliness in it. The tone is more secluded and sedentary and less boisterous. Even in the digressions and the homely details there is a kind of slow rhythm and a meditative quietness that strikes the readers. Owing to the fact that the novel is made up of past ruminations and present musings, it blends the personal with the impersonal.

Amit Chaudhuri's third novel *A New World* offers delicate tableaux from the consciousness of an educated, upper middle class individual in Calcutta – a flickering, insubstantial presence, to be sure, always on the verge of vanishing from history and also a crucial fulcrum of meaning in a city with the reputation for being one of the most ill-served and chaotic in the world.

A New World is peopled with a community of myopic, bespectacled Bengali living ghosts, emotional rather than supernatural apparitions. They are fading memories, lost opportunities and hazy yearnings.

Most events of dramatic significance in the life of its diasporic protagonist, Jayojit, who has returned home from the United States with his young son Vikram, after a divorce from his Bengali wife Amala and a stinging custody battle, are recorded faithfully. Jayojit's ex-wife Amala has left him for her American gynaecologist, though for reasons unclear. She has, however, to all intents and purposes, won custody of Vikram, except for three months a year.

The pace of the novel has a languor about it that is in tune with that of Jayojit's rather quiet and lazy two-month holiday in Calcutta, where he does little but eat, sleep, take his son for walks, play table tennis, chat with his parents or with their neighbours.

Amit Chaudhuri's quiet sense of irony is best depicted in his description of the protagonist's desire to fly by the Bangladeshi Biman Airline. The sheer cheapness of its fares makes Jayojit and his son Vikram travel from New York by the Biman, an airline that doesn't follow a single international regulation and is not a member of the IATA. Jayojit and his son return to their parent's home. Jayojit's father, Admiral Chatterjee asked him why he travelled in the Bangladesh Biman of all airlines. Jayojit replied that the truth is, there are a lot of airlines coming to Calcutta, all of them from third-rate East European Countries like Rumania, Yugoslavia, Aeroflot of the defunct Soviet Union. He did not get seats in KLM or Thai. He told his father that the tickets are less expensive. His father agreed, looking very concerned, but in a way that suggested he was enjoying himself:

'Every week tens of middle-class Bengalis who've been saving up all their lives queue up in the airport to travel by Bangladesh Biman to visit their son or daughter in England or to travel: you know the Bengali weakness for "bhraman"? Last week your Ranjit mesho and Dolly mashi, you remember them' he looked reflective 'took a Biman flight to London'. (10)

Throughout the novel are scattered upper middle class remarks about the difficulty of travelling with those Bangladeshis. Chaudhuri is also adroit at marking the semiotics of expatriation and foreign travel inscribed on the body of many of his characters.

Jayojit's parents, his father, a retired navy officer Admiral Chatterjee and his shy dotting wife Ruby, are politely overjoyed to have Jayojit and their grandson staying in their house, but they are unspeakably disheartened and confused by the divorce. Chaudhuri represents the many ways of being and becoming Bengali in an increasingly mobile world. The contrast between father and son is played out subtly and interestingly in the novel.

Admiral Chatterjee is a patriarchal Bengali Brahmin, an old fashioned person and ever in praise of his wife's cooking. He is totally bewildered at the arrangement of his grandchild spending part of the year with Jayojit and the rest with his mother. Admiral Chatterjee and his son converse in English, not Bengali. They exude a cosmopolitan, bluff friendship, but not much tenderness. Jayojit buys Puja gifts for his parents and notes with relish the dishes his mother cooks for the day. Chaudhuri's catalogue of Bengali cuisine is quite detailed in the novel the paabda, maach in mustard, the rui maach fry and jhol, the luchi and tarakan breakfast. Even his mother's saris are objects of observation:

Once when typing, [Jayojit] thought there was someone else in the room; looking up, he realized it was one of his mother's saris, washed but not pressed, left in a bundle on the sofa; it had become a form on the edge of his vision. (qtd. in Bill. 22).

This plotless novel whispers its visions to the reader, with an eerie intimacy and power, despite the crumpled shape like Rorschach blot of Calcutta itself.

Jayojit and his ex-wife Amala had made the conscious decision to teach their son to call them by Bengali appellation. But, Jayojit wonders how the Bengali kinship terms "Ma" and "Baba" can have any meaning for the son of a divorced pair. However, these appellations are translated and carried over into Vikram's new world as referents that do not necessarily co-exist with each other. When Vikram addresses his father as Baba, the reader sees in it evidence of 'language in action (enunciation, positionality) rather than language in situation' (propositionality) (qtd in Ganguly, 93).

Jayojit and his son spend a slow holiday of meals, showers and playing games in Admiral Chatterjee's house. Jayojit observes his parent's old-fashioned marriage photographs and his son Vikram's childhood photographs. Chaudhuri has always written with acuity about children and he brings to life the tenderness and mutual dependence of Jayojit's relationship with his son through physical observation.

The pleasures of Chaudhuri's writing lie in the absolute clarity of his phrasing, the perfectly mimicked rhythm of a

conversation and, above all, his spare and truthful rendering of the subtle mechanics of close human relationships. At his best, when writing about the subtle mechanics of close human relationships, Chaudhuri can make the going – on of middle-class Calcutta seem of universal relevance. His evenly paced unexcitable realism reads like an unmodified transcript of life. Robert Macfarlane observes: "One sometimes longs for more distortion or more direction" (21). Nevertheless what most distinguishes the novel of Amit Chaudhuri is not their narrative contours, but their repose. They are gentle books of tremendous patience and sensitivity.

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