

Representation of Socio-cultural and Political Issues of Calcutta: A Critical Study of Amit Chowdhuri's Select Novels

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Abstract- Amit Chaudhuri is a versatile writer of contemporary Indian English Literature. He is renowned for his novels and essays. In his novels, Chaudhuri often uses Calcutta as the thematic background to explore the social, cultural, and political changes that have taken place in India over the past few decades. He portrays the city as a site of struggle and conflict, where different social classes and cultural identities collide. Through his characters, he explores the tension between tradition and modernity and the challenges of adapting to a changing society. Amit Chaudhuri can be called a regionalist as he explores his region and its multiple aspects, such as local colour, people, dialect, customs, traditions, landscape etc. As a result, this study will proceed with the distinguished idea that Chaudhuri's works are strongly set in his region, Calcutta, and that, as a regionalist, he has attempted to convey the accurate picture of Calcutta employing all of the elements listed above.

Keywords: Culture, Region, Society, Tradition.

INTRODUCTION:

Amit Chaudhuri has achieved greatness by writing about his region, Calcutta, in the same way, that Hardy, the great Victorian author, kept the spirit of Wessex alive in his writings as well as Narayan's Malgudi and William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha. Calcutta is the literary home of Indian writing, and Chaudhuri is one of them who portrays the real picture of his region. Calcutta becomes the thematic background for almost all of Amir Chaudhuri's novels and he writes about Calcutta like an actual insider, sharing their way of life as well as significant mores. Through most of his novels, he explores the socio-cultural picture and political propagand of the Calcutta region.

There are many well-known authors who have written about Calcutta. Amitav Ghosh is one such author who frequently moves between Eastern and Western cultures and draws on his Bengali heritage. His book *The Calcutta Chromosome* portrays the city of Calcutta, and he carefully and accurately depicts the setting with its unique colours. *The Tiger's Daughter* is the debut novel by well-known American author Bharati Mukherjee, who was raised in an upper-middle-class Bengali family. It contains autobiographical elements and features Calcutta as well as her ancestry. Jhumpa Lahiri is also well known for portraying Calcutta in her novels. In her *Interpreter of Maladies*, she has set some of the stories in Calcutta.

The novels written by Amit Chaudhuri investigate how the setting affects the characters and their stories. He portrays the forests, the hills, the buildings, the roads, the towns, the architecture, and the countryside of his region and gives the most exposure. The region contributes to Chaudhuri's works in every way: through nature, culture, legends, customs, conventions, superstitions, topography, and ecology.

It is useless to criticise Chaudhuri for restricting himself to distinct local areas in Calcutta and focusing on the distinctive elements of their local culture because he has an unusual liking for Bengali middle class. Actually, he is creating small planets. He refers to Bengal, Calcutta, and India all in the same sentence as if they were all the same. He also expresses reluctance towards any Indian culture when he refers to Calcutta's culture and implicitly implies Bengali and Indian culture. He himself confesses, "I grew up with Bengali and Bombay culture, which was a mishmash of Western culture and the local culture" (Galvan, 220).

Amit Chaudhuri's debut novel *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991) depicts the world of Childhood struggles. It contains a mixture of young and old, the growing up and the grownups. It is about Sandeep, a twelve-year-old boy with an impressionable perception. The book mostly depicts Calcutta and life there as viewed by Sandeep, who is visiting the city for a vacation. It is a vague description of a Bengali boy who was born in Bombay and has returned to Calcutta, where he belongs. Although Sandeep's visit to his maternal uncle's house is the main plot of the book, Chaudhuri's attention is on his native Calcutta. He sees everything as being brand-new and odd, and every small discovery is a revelation of something new that has been carefully and precisely recorded. Every tiny detail is interestingly explained, including Sandeep's entry details and the alleyways of Calcutta. In addition, he is curious about everything he encounters, shows interest in everything new, and tries to identify with his community. He makes an effort to view the world with an open mind. A descriptive presentation of the diversity of Bengali culture is created. There is an eighteen-month gap between Sandeep's first and second visits to Calcutta. The story is about a boy visiting his maternal uncle's house, and Chaudhuri always keeps his attention on his native city of Calcutta. In this book, Chaudhuri explored sociocultural identity. He made a deal with colonial reality and realised he could not escape it. His goal is to favourably project native culture while also recognising it. It is a well-known truth that works of art serve as a selective memory of traditions and ideals and performs a prominent social role by revealing the social and cultural practises of the community throughout its evolutionary history. Chhotomama, the youngest maternal uncle of Sandeep, the young protagonist of the novel, serves as a good illustration of a local

subject, a concept that is essential to both the tradition of fiction. In the narration, Chaudhuri emphasises his theoretical criticism. The subjectivity of Chhotomama in this context organises itself through its interpretation of local political beliefs. The eccentric and funny actions of Sandeep's uncle Chhotomama provide a very realistic crystallisation of this political regionalism. However, through the boy's eyes, Chaudhuri portrays the city as a place of contrasts, where poverty and luxury coexist. The novel explores the boy's experiences as he navigates the complex social and cultural dynamics of the city. Chaudhuri's writing almost exclusively emphasises these locations that prevailing historical paradigms ignore. These areas actually play a vital role in the creation and cultivation of the mundane in his narrative, weaving the concrete fabric of place. In this old house filled with antique furniture, radios, and objects, Sandeep feels immense joy. He also sees a sense of rootedness and a strong bond between the brothers and sisters. He feels too "foregrounded" lonely living by himself at his father's enormous company flat in Bombay.

Afternoon Raag, Chaudhuri's second book, is a semi-autobiographical book that explores the wistful feelings of a young man who left his hometown to pursue a degree abroad. The anonymous male protagonist serves as the centre of the story, and each chapter virtually stands alone as a poetic depiction of emotions, sentiments, and the narrator's memories of his youth, the loudness, and the smells of food in his home city of Calcutta. The narrator is filled with feelings of homesickness, nostalgia, and ambivalence regarding his region, Calcutta. As an outsider with nostalgia, he periodically travels back to his home city of Calcutta, which helps him to relax. Through him, a true representation of Calcutta is presented. He used to travel to Calcutta for his vacations before deciding to live there exclusively. The narrator is unable to adapt to the new culture since she feels so alone in England. He longs for his parents, his native Calcutta, and his motherland as he feels alienated. Although the protagonist is physically in Oxford, his mind is in Calcutta, where he lives with his parents and other family members. However, through the boy's eyes, Chaudhuri portrays the city as a place of contrasts, where poverty and luxury coexist. The novel explores the boy's experiences as he navigates the complex social and cultural dynamics of the city.

In *Freedom Song*, Chaudhuri portrays the gradual deterioration and eventual demise of the family business as well as the loss of the homes of the extended family, transitioning from a privileged cocoon life in the family's private compound to commonplace apartments in a municipal block. As a metaphor for the deterioration of traditional middle class values in contemporary India, the loss of the family home and the family company in this novel demonstrates Chaudhuri's deep concern for Indian traditions cloaked in Bengali sensibility. The setting for *Freedom Song* is the early 1990s. The book is about the city of Calcutta and recounts the lives of two middle-class families—Khuku and Bhola Biswas—who are related. In the midst of an intellectual and economic paralysis, twenty-five years of leftist government have transformed the Calcutta of the novel. A significant change is hinted at in the book, namely that economic liberalisation and globalisation will bring about globalisation in India and elsewhere. In the book, Calcutta declines to take part in either of these tasks. Ironically, it tells the tale of two linked families in Calcutta, and domestic life in both households is used to illustrate the culture. Khuku and her brother Bhola Biswas are from middle-class Bengali households, and Chaudhuri especially depicts their lives in this work. The main character of the book, Bhaskar, is Bhola's oldest son. He is a Communist Party member. To promote unity, harmony, and tolerance among all communities, he works extremely hard to plan and put on a street play with Marxist influences. In an effort to locate him a suitable bride and to convince him to put more of an emphasis on his personal life than Party work, he puts his family through a difficult situation. In this book, Chaudhuri also investigates Bhaskar's search for his identity as a communist activist as a husband.

Bhola and his wife were both devoted to Calcutta, but she preferred to travel elsewhere. Her spouse declined when she asked him to. She then recalled the locations she had travelled to with other family members, like Gopalpur, Nabadweep, Kathmandu, etc. She thoroughly enjoyed herself, and while she was there, she made friends with other Bengalis who had travelled to the locations from Calcutta. She had not travelled in a while and yearned to visit Haridwar, Kashi on the banks of the Ganges, and the Lakshmanjhula long swinging bridge. Even though Manik wasn't in India, she yearned to visit him. Her husband was a huge Bengali food fan. He adored all types of food, but nothing compares to traditional Bengali food.

Chaudhuri would mention India, Bengal, and Calcutta all in the same sentence as if they were interchangeable nouns. Similar to this, he would discuss Calcutta culture and implicitly suggest the cultures of Calcutta and India even though he is opposed to any pan-Indian culture. He claims, for instance, that "I really think of it as an extended poem about the end of certain phase in Calcutta, in Bengali culture, and in Indian culture" when referring to the song *Freedom Song*.

A New World tells the story of Jayojit Chatterjee, a divorced writer from America who visits his parents in Calcutta with his son Vikram (Bonny) during the summer. A new world, a place that was unfamiliar to both father and son, observes Jayojit and his son as they spend precious moments together. Jayojit resides in Calcutta with his parents. Chaudhuri explains with elegance the nuances of the married lives of an old couple who are firmly established in the unquestioning roles of their history and of a modern marriage. This book concentrates on the routine activities of daily living, such as eating, going to the bank, and interacting with Calcutta's neighbours, servants, friends, and family. Chaudhuri can capture the lovely, almost magical quality that one can only see in the place one loves through his delicate depictions of the everyday minutiae of existence.

Chaudhuri's novel *The Immortals* is also set in Calcutta. The narrative tells the story of a young man who returns to the city after living abroad for several years. Through the protagonist's experiences, Chaudhuri explores the impact of globalization and modernization on the city and its inhabitants. He also portrays the city as a place of nostalgia and memory, where the past and the present intersect. It uses metaphors involving food, clothing, and music to demonstrate how values are changing in today's materialistic world. He centres the story on the musical ragas to illustrate the struggle faced by those artists trying to fit into the mainstream of popular culture. Chaudhuri travels the byways of the Indian soul, whereas lesser writers fixate about the heat and dust, earning him a place in the pantheon of contemporary authors. His creations are a reflection of Indian ideals with a Bengali sensibility.

CONCLUSION:

Amit Chaudhuri's novels provide a fascinating exploration of life in Calcutta, and the city serves as a powerful thematic background for his work. Through his characters and their experiences, he explores the social, cultural, and political dynamics of the city, and the challenges of adapting to a rapidly changing society. His novels offer a unique perspective on the city and its people, and highlight the richness and complexity of Indian culture and identity.

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