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Cultural Turn: The Burden of the Grand and Amit Chaudhuri's Rejection of it in *A Strange and Sublime Address* and *Odysseus Abroad*

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Abstract

This article explores Amit Chaudhuri's subdued but radical opposition to the "grand" cultural narrative that permeates post-colonial Indian literature written in English. It makes the case that his books A Strange and Sublime Address and Odysseus Abroad subtly rebel against the Western-centered "cultural turn," which values hybridity, spectacle, and reductive identities. The essay places Chaudhuri in the context of Bengali modernity and the nationalist movement in late-colonial India, demonstrating how his writing deviates from the loud, mythic-realist style of authors like Rushdie and instead uses the commonplace, the unremarkable, and the minute as sites of cultural and political significance. Chaudhuri reclaims realism as an indigenous mode attuned to everyday life, memory, and the city's quiet afterlives, rather than as a Western import, through close readings of the domestic Bengali household in *A Strange and Sublime Address* and the London-diasporic consciousness of Ananda in *Odysseus Abroad*. The study highlights his rejection of both the glossy "Indianness" of popular culture and the epic nationalist drama, all the while maintaining a strong emotional and historical connection to Bengal. By doing this, Chaudhuri becomes a Bengali modernist of the twenty-first century who speaks for both his own age and the previous Bengali nationalist and cultural identity theorists.

Keywords: Hybridity, Modernity, Indianness, Nationalism, Identities

Introduction

When Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* came out, Amit Chaudhuri was still a young aspiring writer. From 1990s onward he started expressing his discomfort with the grandeur and the style that lacked depth and excelled in flashy spectacles in Indian literature for Anglophones. What exercised Chaudhuri was the conflation of Indianness, post-coloniality and popular culture into a single entity. The narrowness encouraged reliance of modern Indian cultural texts on their relationship with Western humanities and it rendered them as rewriting and extensions of British and American cultural studies echoed in the offense against the shibboleths of post-coloniality, nationalism and even globalisation in the past fifty

or so years. The existing "cultural turn" is attacked by Chaudhuri in *Clearing a Space* on account of being responsible for narrowing the scope of scholarship for Indian cultural studies. He offers, through a series of essays compiled in the book, alternate engagements to create powerful myths that can help with the Indianness that a post-colonial emancipation India seeks. His critique is poised but not sharp: "The post-colonial novel, on the other hand is frequently rooted in the liberal middle-class conscience and founded in liberal humanist verities: multiculturalism is good; colonialism and fundamentalism are bad, etcetera" (Clearing 116). The present paper seeks to look intently into the alternate pale that Chaudhuri believes is vibrant in its own way thus breaking away from the existing "Western Academy" that favours hybridity and conflation of identity. The goal is to locate this mutiny of Chaudhuri against the Western hegemony that proliferated under the popular culture replacing the old order in his writings. His novels *A Strange and Sublime Address* and *Odysseus Abroad* will be under the lens tracing Chaudhuri as a twentieth century Bengali Modernist still potent in the Twenty first century as a mouth-piece for the earlier thinkers of Nationalism and its identity in Bengal.

Contextual and Theoretical Background

Kolkata used to be the capital of British India and continues to hold a special place in the talks of culture and modernity in the entire country. The masters of the city had pieced together a space far away from the Bengali household and yet it managed to be central around the cosmopolitan cultural discourse of the entire nation. Before the study moves on to the main crux what we understand as Indian nationalism needs to be addressed here with its origin in the soils of Bengal lent to the rest of the mother nation after its conception in imagining the mother Bengal.

Is India a liberal country? In the discourse of political analysis, the debate may take us to places too diverse to deal with but in the context of nationalism and its nature in the East, India is palpably placed in the same bench with China. Like China, it was a sophisticated country in many ways long before the idea of nationalism and the West found their ways to it. The arrival of the British East India Company was marked by an intense trade relationship between the British Empire and the Indian subcontinent. The British borrowed heavily from the Indian banks and the subcontinent welcomed the white men much like what Mazzini's Italy and Herder's Germany wanted to do to in order to enrich their culture– accept, learn and enrich. However, India much different from Europe in advantageous homogeneity and from its neighbour China in radical exclusionist standpoint, relied on nationalist movement to loosen up the grip of Western wrist on every nerve of it.

The history offers significant advantages in understanding the way India as an Asian country subscribed to the idea of nationalism and how it is relevant in the context of Bengal and its nationalistic struggle. The duality that has been addressed so far has a particular legitimacy in unfolding how India saw its nationalist movement through the development of power politics in Asia. Wang Gungwu in his article in Kamenka's *Nationalism* deals with a very comprehensive history of nationalism in Asia. His assessment leads to the claim that the rise of Western power in Asia was not feared or contested for many years but gradually the continent woke up to a fierce fight with the Western domination. They responded to the nationalist movement well after there were no elite Asian left to contest. In other words, the West shifted from the struggle to defeat Asian rulers or local powers to fighting their Western wars in Asia. It was no longer about what the Asia had to offer to the West. It gradually became evident to the intellectuals of the continent that the world is slowly rising to a new world order and the West was at the centre of it. The East lost relevance as a rival but was reduced to a mere bargaining chip for the Westerners to fight their wars. Wang reflects:

> …the British led the way to total Western supremacy in Asia. It was a supremacy assured by a new kind of civilisation built upon the industrial revolution, the liberation of bourgeois economic values and the cohesive nation-state. The supremacy was so overwhelming that the various Western powers settled their territories and interests between themselves, as with the Anglo-Dutch Treaty in 1824 settling their borders along the Straits of Malacca and the Anglo-French agreements to preserve the independence of Thailand. Where they could not agree to divide territory as in East Asia, they supported each other in forcing treaties upon the surviving Asian nations and, where there was enough to go around, they did their utmost to avoid open conflict among them selves. (Kamenka: 87)

This humiliating realisation led the intellectual elites to believe that no armed rebellion or political *coup* could help them in resistance to the unchallenging power and a slow economic victory over the West was too lengthy a plan to pursue if even considered as a plan. The fate of China was not very encouraging which encouraged Japan to take the high road of developing its own nationalism while simultaneously adopting western ways to strengthen itself economically and educationally. The strategy was fruitful and Japan defeated China which had an encouraging impact on the rest of the Asia that started paying more attention to developing national unity. A small number of armed uprisings in various regions including those in the North-Western India were instances of desperate attempt to defeat the colonial power and restore the dynastic authority and hardly had anything to do with a nationalistic counter-attack. In India there were no local elites left to lead the resistance therefore the need to devise a new strategy which was led by intellectual elites of Bengal, Bombay and Madras. People like Gandhi and Nehru handled the political front fighting on the legal and civil front drawing inspiration from within the existing system and on the cultural front. Wang reflects:

> …the Indian strategy against colonial rule served as a model for the new nationalist movements which arose in Ceylon, Burma and Indonesia and, to a lesser extent, Vietnam. And in being such a model, it confirmed the view that nationalism in each empire might be directed against a single Western power but that nationalism in Asia was part of a wider concern with restoring all non-Western peoples to political equality in the new world order. (Eugene: 89)

The present study selects Bengali nationalism, which was essentially based on a Hindu structure, to analyse the duality of Asian nationalism. A theological significance of a common identity may have lost the front seat in developing a modern nation, but they are valid in localised efforts to unite people in the contemporary nation-state situation. Lest it stretches the length of the study, there is no need to re-count the religious impact on society so different from its aggressors who had Christendom mastered. One such example of theologically grounded community that looked forward to fighting the colonial masters was the Bengali intelligentsia.

Bengali Modernity:

Wang makes a serious remark while explaining the West's strategies to counter the rise of nationalism in the East. They identified them in the boundaries of nation-states. It was because of this that nationalism grew within the boundaries of these states and not because it was convenient. The identification of the West of these states was based on their larger strategies to fight different battles in different fronts. This identification as threatening elements was convenient for the nationalists in the East.

> As nationalists, they felt secure in inheriting such an entity and felt challenged to preserve this entity and make it strong, just and prosperous as the colonial power had never done. No matter how common their cause with other nationalists, no matter how essential was anti-imperialist solidarity, they quickly recognised that the nation-state was vital to their kind of nationalism. They were sworn to defend that political entity until independence and beyond. (Kamenka: 92)

One such confined yet determined group of nationalists was that of the Bengali modernists. They were educated and visionaries. Some of them were educated in the western fashion and saw from up close what made the West so powerful. Although it came to direct clashes between their ideas of a modern Bengal and a traditional one but the duality shaped Bengal's vibrant age of Nationalistic as well as modern struggle that helped earn it a distinct face in the freedom struggle. Scholars such as Dipesh Chakrabarty in his *Provincializing Europe* claims that the Bengali struggle for nationalistic stance is full of dualities. To judge the past with a modern yardstick brings up the discomfort of anachronism. Dipesh explains:

> A particular past thus becomes objectified in the observer's time. If such an object continues to have effect on the present, then the historically minded person sees that as the effect of the past. It is through such objectification—predicated on the principle of anachronism—that the eye of the participant is converted into the eye of the witness. This is how a participant in an historical "event" becomes an "eyewitness" for the historian affirming the "rule of evidence" of historiography. (Chakrabarty 238-39)

Indian attitude towards its past is coloured with rejections of a lot of things. As far as history goes of the present post-colonial vibrancy in the country, it belonged to a more Nehruvian sect which started changing its course after Rushdie. Before independence, to majority of the historicists, India was seen from the lenses of Hegel where it was a country riddled with superstitious beliefs and thus anti-modern. Following the independence, the past had to be shaken off. Parallelly, the want of the rising nationalism that ensured the growth of an independent country in its own image was that of a total rejection of the West.

Chaudhuri and his Rejection of the Grand:

Indian literature in English at the very beginning of its independence rejected Mazzini and Herder in their acceptance of alien culture in a national struggle and focused on total confinement of what was national to them. The way the post-colonial novelists assigned Indianness to their writings is of importance here. Although Chaudhuri claimed that India is a big noisy country and so should be the descriptions of it, given his disposition regarding the matter, his novels seem to offer the opposite and thus alternate themselves. What he seems to propose in his novels is shedding off of unnecessary hybridity in pursuit of grandeur in English and acceptance of native tone of the language. His preoccupation lies in offering the distinction Indians need to seek in their literature which is already there and need no innovation. The unique features of Indian literature are as English as the British. The relationship of the East with the idea of imagination, lyricality of language and tone—every sort of authenticity, Amit Chaudhuri claims was denied by the West through exclusion and misrepresentation. But considering they were misrepresented an attempt to regain the identity of authenticity would be to forever seek to justify legitimacy like an immigrant in a foreign land. Amit Chaudhuri is primarily not known for his nationalistic approach in his writings, but he himself and his characters are inseparable from the place of his birth and childhood that was the stage for political drama concerning nationalist movement. Kolkata is painted in his pages where he writes his recollections almost entirely drawn from

memory. Questions such as memory and connectedness to one's motherland and how one grows with the old order to reflect on the past and its shadow over the present, find themselves at the heart of this study.

A typically Bengali household sets the stage for such recollections and as contemporary accounts. His novels play significant role in re-viewing the impact of nationalistic struggle of India on Bengali soil. Through his eyes a Kolkata comes out which is completely different from what it historically used to be. It is doubly different as it started rejecting the old and traditional ways even when the Britishers were around, and again it shed the immediate nationalistic vigour after the colonisers left. It is quiet now and once the centre of cultural movements in the country is now grappling with (economic) challenges and a sense of decline. This shift which is also inevitably generational is a consequence of a long-fought struggle to bring Kolkata out from the colonial to the post-colonial era. The duality is evident in the contradictory images presented in the works of Chaudhuri, but the present study proposes to read into the life that is left in the city that reflects the attitude of a modern mind which is not only representative of Kolkata, but also speaks volumes of the literary preferences of an Indian writer. The study further argues that this duality is sympathetic to the European model of cultural nationalism adopted by many countries including Italy and France.

Amit Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address* came out in 1991. It takes us right into the thin plot which tells no apparent tale but grounds itself in telling the daily lives of a Bengali household. It was the debut novel of the author, and the pictures are painted through the eyes of a 14-year-old boy, Sandeep. He lives in Bombay (now Mumbai) and visits his maternal uncle's house in Kolkata. His accounts include two visits and the novel in its first part is in third person narrative. The second part is about the second visit of the boy who has grown up and we finally hear his voice narrating the somewhat autobiographical elements.

The mundane hits the reader upfront unapologetically. The narrator is not an adult which exposes the lack of seriousness of a grand potential in a post-colonial description. The story is divided into two parts and the first part and hence the past is an information articulated through a trained voice, like a historian who knows more than a child who is probably unable to understand the intricacies behind a lot of things including what is and what should be. This way the story is separated from the immediate knowledge of the protagonist when he was 14 and floats like a memory in the book of history. The autobiographical part is in first person narrative and serves to draw an authenticity. However, the thin plot of the novel is a conscious violation of the rule of his predecessors that India is a baggy monster and so should be its stories and therefore, a duality is further problematised.

In the beginning Chaudhuri places us before a heart-warming welcoming scene:

> Her aunt, by contrast, stood at the head of the stairs, in a place that was half sunlit and half shadowy, with immaculate serenity seemingly not having moved from where she had said goodbye to him about a year ago; she said:
>
> 'How have you been, Mona?'
>
> When she saw Sandeep's mother, she went down the stairs and grasped her hand in a relaxed way; all her excitement shown in her eyes. (Chaudhuri 4)

The kids are fighting playfully touching each other in a gesture that they missed each other very dearly having not seen each other for a long time. The language is warm and the imagery independent of any glorifying bagginess of grandeur. The customs followed by the elders to show respect to each other are placed in the warmth of diction:

> 'Oh no nono,' said Chhotomama, struggling to keep the son's hand away from his feet, 'There is no need for this'. This was half a token gesture towards modesty, and half towards the new, 'modern' India—Nehru's secular India, free of ritual and religion.
>
> 'I have not met you for two years, Dada,' said the son, struggling to get his hands near Chhotomama's toes. 'You must not stop me.' This was half a token gesture towards modesty, and half towards the old, 'traditional' India—Gandhi's India of ceremony and custom. (Chaudhuri 77-78)

The idea of the old and the new in the post-colonial India co-existing in the household is probably the grandest piece the novel has to offer to the readers. Another juxtaposition we see in the novel is regarding the language itself. Contempt for English language in Amit Chaudhuri is reflective of the nationalist India. Sandeep's aunt asks him to make a slogan in English and the novelist offers, "Sandeep, the boy from Bombay, who wrote poems and stories, was supposed to have a good vocabulary in this idiotic foreign language which no one, specially coffee companies could apparently do without" (Chaudhuri 92). This contempt not only brings duality in Chaudhuri who tries to bring sense of India in this language but also places him reminiscing about a past almost back to Bankimchandra who wrote:

> What is the meaning of the word "utility"? Does it have a Bengali equivalent? I do not know English myself and Kamalakanta has said nothing—so I asked my son. He consulted the dictionary and explained it thus: "U" means "you," "till" is to cultivate, "it" is to "eat," and he could not say what the meaning of "y" was. But perhaps Kamalakanta has meant precisely this by "utility," that "you all live by cultivating and eating." What a scoundrel! He called everybody a peasant! . . . My son has turned out to be good in English studies, otherwise we would not have been able to make sense of such a difficult word. (Bankimchandra 54)

Bengali intelligentsia hated the idea of utility but if we focus, it is not hard to find a contempt for the language itself in the above rant. Amit doesn't distance himself from his enthusiastically English loving protagonists just the way Bankimchandra cared to include the information that his son knew English.

Nothing ever happens in the novel. The family is gathered and they enjoy the day by doing what they love to do which is play, talk, eat, gossip etc. The discussions are mundane daily discussions— of office, the daily grind of the grown ups, traffic, so on and so forth. There is no harsh criticism of one another or clashes of opinion– every point is welcome with compassion.

> Chhotomama, whose problems were more ordinary and also more difficult to solve, loved listening to the remote complains of his sister's life, objecting to or agreeing with, now and then, a phrase. Sandeep, an only child, felt the shared background of a brother and brother, and brother and sister, throw upon him a shade as that of the cool, expansive branches of a rooted banyan tree. (Chaudhuri 6)

Though the conversations stayed light and everyday, they always found plenty to talk about. Weekdays felt less lively than Sundays, as the men hurried off to their office jobs. You'd see the grown men scarfing down meals before dashing out, with a polished pair of shoes waiting patiently by the door – gleaming and impeccable. Their sharp office outfits transformed them, painting a picture of the typical Bengali man navigating the modern grind of 10-to-6 routines.

In Odysseus Abroad Chaudhuri seems nostalgic of his past and tells a story of an Indian boy in London during the mid-nineteen-eighties. James Wood writes in The New Yorker:

> Nothing very much "happens" in the course of its two hundred-odd pages; the book seems almost to relax itself into real time. But each page notices something freshly, or registers something true. And what is being noticed is of intense significance, because it is being seen by an outsider who also half-belongs, by virtue of a shared language and education, to an English life he is warily studying. Ananda, the novel's protagonist, is a twenty-two-year-old Indian student and aspiring poet, living in modest squalor in Bloomsbury and studying at an unnamed institution that resembles University College London, where Chaudhuri studied. (Wood)

In England Ananda feels estranged and a bit sensitive about his race and sex which also made him lonely and anxious. Although he separates by convincing himself that he has a relationship with this city because his parents were married here. He also rejects this identity when he feels ashamed that it ruled India for centuries. He dismisses this idea as well by asking vaguely that if that were true how come the cities in both the countries are so different from each other. The rejection and the irresistible call to be an English made him eat lettuce sandwiches with tea as a snack. He read Agatha Christie and Erle Stanley Gardener. His preference shifted from jeans to corduroys only to discover that they bring nothing special to his personality now that he is in London. The distinctiveness he enjoyed back in India probably kept him from contemplating that Shakespeare's summer's day had no appeal to an average Indianfantasy.

The duality is more explicit when we see Chaudhuri introduce a new character when the novel almost started sagging. Radhesh is a relative of Ananda who lives in London. This maternal uncle serves as a great contrast to the main character and brings joyfully the image of two immigrants walking on the streets of London. He is taken aback by Ananda's ignorance of Bengali literature. He loves to quote Tagore, and the ignorant Agatha Christie lover made very little of it. He made very little of what his uncles had to say about nationality as well. He was friends with a Pakistani who looked like the Iranian Shah. It also made little sense when Radhesh called Shah an "old soul":

> Old soul?" said Ananda. "Yes, born into the world again and again and again. Most Indians and Pakistanis are 'old souls.' They've been born so many times that they're tired, they've returned to reality so often they take it for granted. If you ask Shah, 'I gave you ten pounds yesterday for some cigarettes—what happened to the change?,' he'll look astonished, and say, Arrey Nandy, I gave it back to you in the afternoon, because he thinks he did. He's been around for a very, very long time. Small inaccuracies escape him, and minor discrepancies don't matter. Similarly, if you ask an Indian on the street, 'Bhai, which way to Camden Town?' he'll give you directions even if he's never heard of Camden Town. Old soul. Tired from having come back repeatedly. No longer mindful of detail, just living out, yet again, the duties and obligations. (Odysseus 159)

It appears that Choudhuri is explicitly interested in the development of English novels in the Indian scenario while he is extremely aware of the deeper sense of possession of an inherently rich India. Upon looking at all the aspects including history of nationalism in the East and after locating Indian scenario the present study finds that, the rejection that Indian writers as nationalists expressed through their works before independence continues to reflect on their more modern and liberal inheritors. It is also interesting to observe that Amit Chaudhuri who reflects on the allegation that realist art is the property of the West finds it amusingly ambiguous that the representation of the real in the world of representations where reading and publishing is controlled by money has any significance. The duality

of the belief that fantasy is essentially Eastern while realist art is Western is exposed through the writings of Amit Chaudhuri. He has claimed in an essay:

> Realism – the relationship that modes of representation have to the seasons, human life and the universe – has been fundamental and unquestioned component of Indian art, from classical dance to the epics of Valmiki and Vyasa, the court poetry of Kalidasa and the modern lyrics of Tagore; on the other hand in Western culture, realist art, with its special claim to renovate our perception of the world, has always resided somewhat uneasily at the centre, repeatedly called on like an immigrant, to justify the legitimacy of its existence. (Clearing 130)

But in his writings about the smaller things of life and with the profound realism Chaudhuri used in his language, he has made a strong case for what he said before proving through his novels.

To narrate Bengal's path toward embracing nationalism, one can't ignore its history. Everyday hassles like power outages, scarce phone lines, relentless rains, and their disruptions might deter love for the city. Yet, truly cherishing one's homeland requires looking past these surface realities. As explored earlier the nationalism that blossomed in Kolkata and spread across Bengal stemmed from a unique modernity, rooted differently from Europe's. There, reason was uniform, shaping the modern in ways Bengal refused to mimic; Rabindranath Tagore, Arun Kolatkar, R. K. Narayan, V. S. Naipaul, Jayanta Mahapatra and many more including Raja Rao refused to mimic. Chaudhuri's eyes long to see a Bengal where the initially foreign concept of nationalism faded as a turn from "the turn" brings about modernity—one that honors its past without the anachronistic pitfalls plaguing Europe's modern history.

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