

**SOCIAL TRANSITION THROUGH THE REPRESENTATION OF HOME:  
A STUDY OF AMIT CHAUDHURI'S NOVELS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Amit Chaudhuri is a versatile writer of contemporary Indian English Literature. He is a poet, novelist, essayist and literary critic and also a good singer. He has been acclaimed worldwide for his novels and love for Indian classical music. His works show the influence of a particular space on the characters and events of his novels. Amit Chaudhuri's novels represent different aspects of home and domestic life and demonstrate the ways home is charged with different registers and resonances: representing both the physical aspects such as the design, construction and use of domestic spaces -and the symbolic aspects relating to the family and the nation. His novels depict the fictional representation of home and share a common focus on domestic themes and issues. The domestic settings of his novels illustrate the material history of the Indian home and associated religious, social and cultural practices, and show how these are adopted and reworked by the protagonists. Similarly, in the depiction of domestic life, gender roles and social relations in the household, Chaudhuri's novels provide new perspectives on the theoretical models of the Western and the Indian domesticity. The paper aims to explore that how the novels represent the importance of home in the construction of cultural and social discourses about class, caste, family and identities.

**Key Words:** Home, Globalization, Space

It has become a tradition of geographical representation of home in contemporary Indian novel in English through an in-depth reading of mainstream Indian novels by a number of prominent writers including Anita Desai, Amit Chaudhuri, Shobha De, Pankaj Mishra, and Rohinton Mistry. Concepts of home are explored including identity, self, nation, and how these are reflected in the narratives and genre of the novels

Amit Chaudhuri is one of them who also have been narrated in his novels the social transition through the representation of the lived experience of home in *A Strange and Sublime Address*, *Afternoon Raag*, *Freedom Song* and *A New World*. The worldliness of these four novels is present in the narratives of change that are taking place within the urban middle class homes, and I focus on how these novels represent ways in which these changes are transforming the concepts of family and class hegemony. The focus on the family and the home is an affinitive feature between these novels. The family is important in providing, and transmitting a sense of shared class, politics and nationalist discourses. I explore the significance of these values and consider how these are contested by the 'new' middle class in terms of public culture, lifestyle and employment. In relation to the family, I examine how the representation of the traditional extended family in the novels symbolises stability. I briefly describe the plots of these novels and some of the key issues about home that each raises with regard to social, cultural and economic changes taking place in society as a result of globalization. Juxtaposing these novels illustrate how the Indian middle class is responding in different ways to the transition to a more globalised society.

In these novels less or more Chaudhuri depicts the decline and eventual destruction of the family business and the loss of the extended family's houses, moving from a privileged cocoon life in the family's private compound to ordinary apartments in a municipal block. The loss of house and the decline of the family business, in these novels, is a metaphor for the decline of 'old' middle class values in modern India and a period of transition and change socially, culturally and economically. In an interview with Fernando Galvan, Chaudhuri states in connection with the settings of his novels, "I identified Calcutta as a place that was home. Home was interwoven with the Bengali language, my mother tongue...which was hardly spoken out of my immediate home. In school I spoke only English, so to go back to Calcutta was to re-enter the Bengali language. (Galvan, 217)

Amit Chaudhuri's the first novel *A Strange and Sublime Address*, Sandeep, the main character of novel seems to be a portrayal of Chaudhuri's own childhood who celebrates not only the simple joys of childhood-bathing, eating, sleeping and exploring the city-but also how the business of living, working, coming to terms with the world of senses imposes an increasing burden on the soul. From an organized and lonely life of a flat in Bombay (situated on the twenty-third floor), Sandeep comes to Calcutta to spend his holidays at his uncle's home. Through the eyes of the ten-year-old, a vast, kaleidoscopic backdrop emerges, and even such a simple act as bathing takes on the overtones of a ritual and a keen sense of nostalgia assails us. A passage like this shows the twin themes inextricably linked in Chaudhuri's novel: the celebration of simple joys of childhood and the evocation of a way of life.

The writer's knowledge of Calcutta city appears to be very sound. He suggests various ways of spending a Sunday evening in Calcutta, for instance, "one should drive to Outram Ghat, take a stroll at river Hooghly, could stay home, and listen to plays on radio or watch a cinema" (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 11). There are several situations in the novel, which have been described, in a humorous or witty tone to provide pure entertainment to the readers. For instance,

the episode about Chhotomama's struggle to take out his car is written in a humorous vein. The entire situation is so comic that the reader almost picturises the episodic and laughs at it as a vivid picture emerges.

It was a strange and sublime address, suggesting Chaudhuri's love for this sublime address. It may be a co-incident but the above address shows nice appropriation of the title of the novel. In this attempt at cognitive mapping Sandeep's cousin, in Joycean fashion, connects his home with the world. This fragment is important not only in tracing Chaudhuri's indebtedness to European modernism, but can be also read as a cosmopolitan statement, as a departure from nationalist modes of self-identification in order to become a part of the global community, while at the same time retaining local particularities

In *Afternoon Raag*, the narrator, when physically situated in Oxford, often returns in his thoughts to his family home in Bombay and, later, to Calcutta. He straddles the two worlds literally—on his trips back and forth—and more importantly, imaginatively. They learn to perceive the present moment as it was perceived by modernists. In his "Notes on the Novel after Globalization," Chaudhuri stresses that the "now" of globalization has little to do with—is, in fact, inimical to—the "epiphanic," with its disruptive, metaphysical potential. He says:

Globalisation is about "being at home in the world" in a wholly unprecedented manner...in a way peculiarly sanctioned and authored by the market. For the first time with globalization we have not so much the West's familiar investment in the idea of the future, and of development, but an apotheosis, quite unlike the modernist's □quasi-religious recuperation of the "present moment" or the epiphany in their work.  
(*Clearing a Space*, 204)

From Australia we can be easily taken to some oil-producing country in the Middle East. Abhi is pressing the back of his father, Chhotomama, and moves from one point to another to bring comfort to him. Now, this familiar sight of the conventional Indian home is suddenly made exotic by the use of a few atypical images, "Searching for that exact spot of pain was a delicate matter, a life or several lives might depend on it; it was like trying to detect a mine in minefield or a vein of oil in a desert" (63).

In *Freedom Song* Chaudhuri depicts the decline and eventual destruction of the family business and the loss of the extended family's houses, moving from a privileged cocoon life in the family's private compound to ordinary apartments in a municipal block. This loss of house and the decline of the family business, in this novel, is a metaphor for the decline of 'old' middle class values in modern India, which shows that Chaudhuri has great concern for Indian values coated in Bengali sensibility. Transition and change have redefined life and transformed its contours at personal, social and economic levels.

*Freedom Song* is about the life of three generations of an extended family. Set in Calcutta in the 1990s, the novel chronicles the lives of Bhola and his sister Khuku and their respective families, portraying the banalities of daily life: eating, sleeping, and going to work. In the novel, Bhola's family lives in a house on Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar Road with his wife and three children. Khuku lives with her husband Shib nearby, and her friend Mimi is staying with them. Running through the novel, there is a strong sense of stability and continuity of domestic life that anchors home against external changes taking place in Calcutta as well as in India in general. These changes include communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims, globalisation and economic liberalisation, diasporic scattering of family members living worldwide. *Freedom Song*

represents a more subtle shift in the changing middle class values showing gradual transition and change in the structure and decoration of the houses and the arrival and departure of family members.

The novel revolves around the lives and reminiscences of two families, Khuku and her husband Shib, a couple in their sixties, and of Khuku's younger less prosperous brother Bhola and his wife Abha, and the family's marriage plans for their unambitious son Bhaskar. It is about the lives of educated the middle class family. The important things that make up the novel are the individual, the trajectories of their lives, the situations, the moment that are part of their indelible memories and desires and the web of their social life, its compulsions and desires and the web of their social life, its copulations and complexities. The important characters who figure in the world of this novel are Khuku and Shib, Bhola and his wife Abha, Mini and Shantidi Bhaskar and his nephew, Mohit son of Puti and a few other relations and acquaintances. So, we can say that it is almost family saga.

Chaudhuri's novels are primarily descriptions of people and places. As the title *Freedom Song* makes it clear that the novel is a song but of Bengali culture and Kolkata rather than any kinds of freedoms. Door, windows, house, verandah, etc. are important for the novelist. He describes them in such a manner that even these ordinary things become interesting. He can notice "A maze of houses, predominantly off-white and red, with scattered island of green, dull facades, one lot of houses hiding from another" (82). These changes from an extended to a nuclear family set-up are particularly visible through the representation of home in the novels. For example, both the novels depict urban dwelling of the old middle classes from the large family houses of *Freedom Song*. The two sisters in the novel Khuku and Mimi converse in the 'familiar' East Bengali dialect. Nevertheless, the old middle class culture is changing gradually and having to incorporate elements of the new middle class culture and family life is also portrayed as stable and continuous. In the novel, we are introduced to the daily life of two branches of an extended family living in Calcutta. The first of those families, consisting of Bhola, his wife Puti, their two sons Bhaskar and Manik, and their daughter Priya, all live in a house in Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar Road. The house is depicted as solid and steady despite the superficial changes to its decor and the addition of kitchen appliances introduced by its inhabitants:

This house had been a wedding gift from Bhola's father-in-law, part of a dowry. Since then it had gone through changes, for the worse and then for the better, but its red stone floors and stairs and its bottle-green windows with slats and the small prayer room upstairs had remained the same. The kitchen had been painted; new shelves had been fitted; and the earthen oven . . . had been put in the shed at the back of the house where the coal and the wood used to be kept. (*Freedom Song*, 37-38)

The house, thus, represents a symbol for the fixity and stability of this family, and is also symbolic of the traditions of the old middle class. The basic structure of the house had remained the same: the red stone floors, the bottle-green coloured windows, and the location of the *puja* room. The changes to the fabric of the house have been made as the family fortunes have grown, so the kitchen has been painted and new shelving has been added. Also presumably central heating has been installed as the stores of coal and wood are no longer needed and the redundant earthen oven probably replaced by a newer electric model. Even when new additions join the family, such as Bhaskar's new wife, the house provides a sense of history and continuation; when

the newly married couple take over the rooms on the second floor of the house for their marital home and these rooms contain photographs of relatives watching over the newly married couple which provide a sense of connection to the past: ". . . upstairs where their new life began, beneath the photographs of late and ever present grandparents" (184). In the second house, inhabited by Khuku, Bhola's sister, and her husband Shib, there is also a sense of the continuity of family life in the daily routine of the household as the following quotation shows:

They [Khuku and her visiting friend Mimi] woke, slept, and talked. They eked out the days with inconsequential chatter. Rumours of atrocities in other cities came and went around them. Meanwhile, Nando [one of the servants] went to market and came back.... (99)

Here, continuity manifests as a regular routine within the household: the women pass the time by sleeping, talking and gossiping in the house. In his portrayal of male and female characters in his novels, Chaudhuri portrays traditional family life "based on patriarchal conceptions where women are reduced to the limited agency of wives and mothers within their homes" (83)

Khuku is a housewife, a role that might be expected of the older pre-independence generation of middle class women; Mimi is a school teacher. Here, Chaudhuri attempts to show the precariousness of the household, teetering on the brink of change around them. The reference to atrocities in other cities' is made by the author's narrative voice and is dropped in almost as an incidental event. The atrocities here refer to the demolition in 1992 of the *Babri Masjid* at *Ayodhya*, which the Hindu nationalists claim is the sacred site of Ram's birthplace, and also to the communal riots and violence that followed across India, notably the Shiv Sena riots that took place in Bombay in 1992 and 1993. The focus, here, on domestic matters rather than on external events like politics and violence reflects the interiority of the women's lives, and the continuation of the smooth-running of the household. The characters in *Freedom Song* exhibit introversion, an inward-looking gaze towards the private spaces of the home. So, this inward-looking gaze demonstrates the worldliness of this novel whose 'old middle class characters' social and domestic lives focus around events taking place in private spaces rather than the new middle class orientated urban public culture of Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta. An example of this introversion is when Khuku and her friend Mini go out in the car for a visit to the nursing home. On this trip, their focus is entirely on themselves: the conversation that takes place between them and their inner thoughts. They appear oblivious of the view out of the car window:

Here, at the entrance to the lane, was a sprawling rubbish-heap of an unimaginable colour - but the two women in the car wouldn't notice it. Mini was wearing a white *tangail sari* with a slender green border. And a dark cardigan: bent forward slightly, she was a mixture of light and dark this afternoon. Many times Khuku had persuaded her to wear brighter colours. But she had always refused. . . . Through traffic jams, bursts of exhaust fumes, a mad chorus of car horns, they'd come, passing the "boulevard" in *Gariahat*, with its tinsel and Christmas caps hanging from the stalls, and its portraits of Ramakrishna and imitation Rembrandts, empty exercise books and jars of spices and generators; then the roundabout at *Gol Park*. Through all this they'd come. The nursing home rose before them like a mirage. (*Freedom Song*, 69)

Chaudhuri's description of this journey shows how he depicts Khuku's and Mini's selective vision of the world outside the car; the car serves as an extension of the home, and throughout the journey represents the private spaces of the home. When they arrive at their destination of the nursing home, Chaudhuri describes it as a mirage, as though the two women have been passing through a desert rather than through a busy city. Chaudhuri's description in the narrative of the sights the two women pass through also emphasises a sense of exoticism and distance: as they leave their home and drive into the line of traffic, they unseeingly pass a rubbish heap of 'unimaginable colour', which is then contrasted with a description of Mini's clothing which by contrast is dull white and green. Khuku encourages her to wear brighter colours, yet somehow does not see the rubbish. Then there is the noise and the hustle and bustle of the roads and streets that they pass through on their journey.

His fourth novel, *A New World* (2000), won Sahitya Akademi Award in 2003. It is the story of Jayojit Chatterjee, a divorced writer living in America, who returns to his parents' home in Calcutta with his son Vikram (Bonny) for summer break. His elderly parents are first unable to comprehend the collapse of his marriage. What hurts Jayojit is the shrinking space that Bengali culture carries with itself and the changing face of the metropolis. Bengali and common place things like hurry to catch the train, noise in the railway, canteen and announcement in the departure.

The narrative of this novel starts with Jayojit, a Bengali economist, teaching in America. He visits his parents in Calcutta during his college holidays with his seven-year-old son, Bonny. He has recently divorced his wife, also a Bengali from Calcutta, who has left him to live with her lover who is a gynecologist and lives in America. The story describes his stay in Calcutta. In the process, we see his interaction with his parents, his parent's relationship and his own relationship with his parents. There are also flashback to his broken marriage and his parents' abortive attempt to arrange a second marriage for him with a Bengali divorcee. He had met her on his previous visit but they had got nowhere. She had backed out; he now leaves from his father, because he had seemed to be looking not so much for a wife as a governess for his son.

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