

Mapping the Local: Literary Micro-Geographies of Amit Chaudhuri

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Abstract: The paper is a critical exploration of the concept and the application of the idea of local tints in the works of a modern Indian writer, Amit Chaudhuri. Leaving behind the postcolonial grand narrative that has dominated readings of Indian English fiction since the start of the twentieth century, the paper holds that the phenomenology of the local is central to Chaudhuri; the specific textures, sounds, atmospheres, and mundane details of place, with Calcutta (Kolkata), its native, giving the novelist primary focus, and Bombay (Mumbai) and provincial towns receiving secondary focus. Through a critical examination of his major novels, viz., the title chapters of his works, which are a strange and sublime address, afternoon raag, freedom song and the immortals, the analysis illustrates the ways in which an aesthetic by Chaudhuri makes the minor, the transient and the senses visible. It argues that his local tints are not, however, merely decorative, but represent a radical form of attention, which opposes monumental history, national allegory, and the typical elements of the Indian novel in English, to provide a different ontology of the everyday where the local is a place of silent but significant epistemological and aesthetic revelation.

Keywords: Amit Chaudhuri; Local Tints; Everyday; Postcolonial Minimalism; Calcutta- Kolkata; Indian English Fiction.

Introduction

This canonization of Amit Chaudhuri into the English-language Indian prose fiction largely is paradoxical. The fiction is purposefully placed by him in contrast to the unremitting, unremitting, chain-of-narratives, which, under the massive influence of Salman Rushdie, had taken over the genre (Chaudhuri, “The Meaning of” 11). Coming into focus during the early 1990s, at a time that still echoes the magic-realist, historiographic metafiction of the Rushdie school, the oeuvre by Chaudhuri is a volley of silence. Where the fashionable style was the grandiloquent allegory and the bombardment of polyphony, Chaudhuri had developed a style of extraordinarily restraint, judicial accuracy, and a lyrical closeness, a focus on the details of upper-middle-class urban existence.

This counter-tradition is best explained, this paper holds, by the aesthetic principle of governing, which is the governing

tints. Chaudhuri creates a radical, anti-monumental literary microcosm by paying extreme attention to the very particular textures, sounds, and atmosphere of the proximate, of the colour of a Calcutta afternoon, the cadence of a music lesson, the sociology of a drawing-room.

The visual art lexicon has been borrowed to explain how Chaudhuri has used local tints to describe the particular colouration, light, and environment of a place. In his fiction, though, this concept does not confine itself to the visual, but covers the entire sensorium of a Bombay flat, the incensed smell of panta bhat, the light of a Calcutta afternoon, the amateur music in a singing lesson in a by-lane. This essay postulates that Chaudhuri has used local tints as an intentional aesthetic and philosophical endeavor, a modus operandi which goes against the so-called imperative of interestingness (Chaudhuri, The Meaning of 9) that is applied in Indian fictions.

Obsessing over seemingly trivial facts, Chaudhuri creates a new meaning of significance, with his universe where relevance lies in perception, memory and the moment itself. His worry, as he notes in *Translating India* is not with the grand, the grand, the non-allegorical, the non-epic (27).

This study shall follow the local tints as a narrative strategy by analyzing his key fiction work and critical essays. It will discuss three aspects, namely, the phenomenological expression of Calcutta in sound, in stillness, and in season; the local colour that is represented in art and music practices as a kind of non-utilitarian practice; and the socio-economic undertones in the form of the Bengali middle-class home. The conclusion will place the project of Chaudhuri in the context of wider literary concerns, which will propose that his emphasis on the local tints is a crucial, alternative direction in postcolonial writing - one that is involved in postcolonial minimalism, and which is dedicated to an ethics of attention to the immediate world.

Phenomenology of Place: Calcutta as a Sensorium

The local color that Chaudhuri uses in his quintessential version is the Calcutta of the 1970s and 1980s which, though no longer enjoying its colonial imperialism, is plagued by economic stagnation and political instability, but full of decadent interiority. He does not represent Calcutta in terms of any iconic landmarks or significant historical events but in its breath, in its day to day life. City elements in *A Strange and Sublime Address* are filtered by the minds of the young

boy, Sandeep, who is a Bombay visitor. The story gains its strength through the fragments of senses: the afternoon was a long, prolonged sigh; the fan moved slowly, spreading the heat uniformly all over the room (Chaudhuri, Strange 43). The local colour here is not a monument, but a certain quality of lazy time and heat, which has been actualized by the slow fan. The prose by Chaudhuri tend to reflect the rhythms of the place where it is written, slow, wiggly and intersected by lapses and attentive pauses.

Sound forms an important element of this local color. The sounds of Calcutta of Chaudhuri are carefully documented: the screams of vendors on the street, the noise of crows, the dhur-dhur of the fan put up on the ceiling, the soft music of a radio belonging to one of the neighbours. A soundscape is turned into a structure principle in *Afternoon Raag*, the novel, which is organized by the Hindustani musical technique of raag. An Indian student studying at Oxford, the protagonist remembers Calcutta by the sound: it is combined with memories of his music classes: The city outside was a hum, a distant roar, interrupted by sharp shouts of the hawkers (Chaudhuri, Afternoon 67). Thus, the local tint becomes associative as it is created by the power of memory and artistic form, the line distinguishing place and aesthetic practice is distorted.

In addition, Chaudhuri also renders the peculiar temporality of the Bengali middle-class life that is covered with its rites, meals, and changing of the seasons. The arrival of the monsoon has ceased to become a meteorological phenomenon but it is a change

in the color of the neighborhood: the sky grew dark too early, and there was some odor in the air, the odor of wet mud and expectation (Chaudhuri, *Freedom Song* 112). His stories are based on a cyclical, non-historical time, his sense of seasonality (*ritu*), which, in contrast to the linear, progressive time of the nation-state. The local color is a mood, then, a mixture of sensory impressions that arouse an exact form of being in a given location.

The Regional Colour of the Art of Art: Music and the Non-Utilitarian.

The local tints of Chaudhuri goes beyond the material surroundings to the cultural activity, especially the quest of music and poetry. Due to this society, which has been characterized more and more by utilitarianism and political disquiet, these practices are depicted as precarious, outdated, but richly significant islands of interiority. This theme is explored the longest in *The Immortals* with the backdrop being the world of classical music and Bombay of the 1970s. The novel traces the life stories of a rich businessman, Shyamji who is a passionate patron and a middle-class music teacher, Mallika Sengupta and her son, Nirmalya.

It is the local color here, the particular, inward world of Hindustani classical music, its rites and hierarchies, its secrets. Chaudhuri pays close attention to the description of the small and damp flat in which Mallika teaches lessons, the drone of the tanpura, and the serious and pedantic (a little pedantic) ambiance of a baithak (musical gathering) (Chaudhuri, *Immortals* 56, 89). The world is not glamorous, it is the world of hard drilling,

financial instability, and ego tussles. By Nirmalya, Chaudhuri is able to express the collision between the neutral world of the abstract and pure raag and the world of the compromised and material. The coloration of this local artistic climate serves as a prism to analyze great transformations in Indian society, the conflict between tradition and modernity, art and business. But Chaudhuri does not romanticise it. The ritual of music is a local color since it is based on a particular household, particular relations, and particular instances of imperfect, human beauty. According to Nirmalya, the music was transcendental and at the same time totally of the world, reeking of the daily, dust, sweat, and oil (Chaudhuri, *Immortals* 212).

As with the case of *Afternoon Raag* and *An Strange and Sublime Address*, musical training is found as a motif that reoccurs not as a means of becoming famous but as a practice and a means of organizing perception. It signifies a value system that is against the instrumentalist motivations of colonial India and post independence India. It is a local tint, thus, a cultural, ethical one, a certain space of opposition to what Chaudhuri sees as the India-as-commodity discourse of a narrative of India-as-commodity (*The Meaning of 14*).

The Domestic Microcosm: Change, Class and Bengali Home

The main locale of the local colors of Chaudhuri is the Bengali middle-class family home - its architecture, its social codes, its unconscious worries. His fiction is a masterpiece in domestic anthropology. The decayed mansion of *A Strange and Sublime*

Address, the small, book-filled, flat of Freedom Song, the upwardly mobile Bombay apartments in the immortals, everywhere is sociologically precise. The regional color is in details: the smelling almirah containing some naphthalene, the greasy spot on the wall near the switch, the well-thumbed copy of naphthalene magazine *Desh* (Chaudhuri, Strange 18, 92).

This home is not like a refuge of the past but the very place, where the historical processes, Partition, the Naxalite movement, economic liberalization, are experienced as delicate vibrations. Freedom song, a story set in Calcutta in the early 1990s, has the political violence of the times oozing into the dialogue and changing the daily routine, but the action of the story is the wedding preparations and family gossip. It is the genius of the novel that huge events are transferred into the local hue of the mundane life. The narrator notes that history occurred in other places, in this instance it was a rumor, a transformation of the character of dread, a slight modification of the silence in the afternoon (Chaudhuri, Freedom Song 155).

In a great sense this literary project of Chaudhuri is a kind of silent and yet precise sociology of the interior of the Bengali middle-class. His genius does not lie in plotting a course of class by the direct confrontation and ideological declaration, but in its delicate, material engraving in the world of the household. He has the dissenting yet frequently charged registers of the bhadralok world, between the aristocratic graciousness of the old and the marketable wealth of the new professional group, as delicately as the

ethnographer. This division is not produced by the plot but by a language of accruing, telling features: the whisper of a factory-made handloom tant sari as opposed to the crackling shine of a factory-made one; the all-purpose adherence to a local, humbly-packaged glucose cookie, as compared to an imported chocolate; the solid, nationalist feel of an Ambassador car compared to the small, efficient modernity of a Maruti 800.

Such approach is best expounded in the most refined version of the methodology, namely the one in the book *The Immortals*, where the house reaches to the world of artistic patronage. The interaction between the businessman, Shyamji, who is rich, self-made and the middle-class musicians Mallika and Nirmalya Sengupta is a fragile ecosystem of power, aspiration, and cultural capital. Chaudhuri carefully exposes the economics of the aesthetic pursuit the unwritten agreements of obligation and debt, the conflict between the desire of the patron to transcendence in music and the survival of the musician, the humiliations of generosity concealed in the generosity. The drawing room and the music room in this case are platforms on which class is acted and bargained via the very exercise of rarefied culture.

Thus, the Chaudhurian dwelling goes beyond its functional role to be a musical microcosm. It is a palimpsest in which the local colour of social change, the gradual corruption of old values, the silent invasion of new money, the apparitions of political upheaval, are compounded, perceived and experienced. It is itself a storehouse of a fading-away lifeworld, pregnant with the

obscure rumour of history. The space of intimacy that transpires in this domestic domain is thus a furnace of silence dispersed with the rules that one is governed by; a theater of the ordinary, where in the subsumption of the grand accounts of postcolonial India are condensed in the quality of afternoon light streaming through the old furniture, or in the setting of snacks on the table. Class in these spaces is not a category but an existence, a collection of practices embodied and Chaudhuri faithfully and heart-rendingly gives.

Conclusion: Minimalism Postcolonially

The literary work done by Amit Chaudhuri, which focuses on the detailed interpretation of local colour, is a radical break with the mainstreams of the Indian English fiction. Chaudhuri presents a practice of the profound engagement with the specific instead of the cultural translation on a grand scale expected of novels in an era. The fact of place, and in that fact of a moment of history, then, is commonly best grasped not in its generalities, but in its sensual and prosaic details, the colour of the sky before a shower, the habit of a music-lesson, the debris of a sitting room.

This interest makes him a son of a line of literary minimalism in literature, and the aesthetics of the banal, as goes James Joyce in the Dubliners and the tales of Alice Munro. Taken in a postcolonial reading, it is also a rebellion of sorts, a silent but insistent refusal to exoticize or to give in to the demand of a global audience to have this or that version of India. His work is to reclaim the ordinary as he writes in his criticism publication, *The Origins*

of Dislike, where he tries to reclaim it as part of the need to be extraordinary (Chaudhuri 83).

We should not, then, see the descriptive flair in the oeuvre of Chaudhuri as a flourish, it is in reality, a constitutive element that supports the architecture of the text. His regional colorings form an alternative epistemology of the proximate a phenomenological, accretive form of knowing with a bias towards subjective perception and the feel of lived experience rather than great abstract narratives. Such aesthetic methodology subjects the audience to a reciprocated ethic of reading: it challenges them to slow down, to notice fugitive details, the sound of a ceiling fan, the smell of mustard oil, the special silence of an afternoon, to perceive in these details a source of profound meaning. Chaudhuri achieves two things in this slight readjustment of focus: he not only creates a portrait that is both indelible and full of senses of late-twentieth-century Bengali life of the bhadralok, he also pushes the formal and philosophical boundaries of the post-colonial novel.

In his works, it is possible to trace an open thesis: it is not necessarily the macro-politics of nation and identity that excavate the post-colonial condition but that should be strictly challenged with the help of the micro-politics of the domestic realm, the vernacular, and the consciousness of the individual. This is his cornerstone legacy, this strategic turn, away panorama/ intimate, away epochal/ everyday. Chaudhuri shows that the most significant histories are often made not in the grand colors of the canonical past, but in the understated colours of the everyday.

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