

Exploration of Human Relationships in Amit Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address*-A Literary Journey of Place and Time

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Abstract

Amit Chaudhuri was born in Calcutta in 1962 and grew up in Bombay. He was a student at the Cathedral and John Cannon School, Bombay. He received his degree in English Literature from the University College London, and wrote his doctoral dissertation on D. H. Lawrence's poetry at Balliol College, Oxford. He has written seven novels. Amit Chaudhuri's first novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991) portrays a twelve year boy Sandeep who made his visit to Calcutta from Mumbai. He stays in his maternal uncle's house to spend the holidays. Here, one can find Chaudhuri making comparison between the simple childhood life and the lives of the corporate. The reader can also visualize the backward and the forward movement of the two cities- the fast moving life in Mumbai and simple and rustic life in Calcutta. Life in Calcutta seems to be carefree; the life in Mumbai on the other hand is well organized and perfect. Sandeep feels trapped in Bombay. The novel, thus, deals with two themes – simple joys of childhood and the evocation of a way of life.

Key Words: Human Relationship, Home, Rustic life, Corporate world

'Man is a Social Animal' says Aristotle. Man either as an individual or an integral part of the society is bound to relationship with one another. The Human relationship based on how the person views his own life and the lives of others. As literature is the artistic record of life mirrors the human relationships. The writers delve deep into such relationships in their works. The theme expresses the author's opinion or raises a question about human nature of the meaning of human experience. Chaudhuri discusses the various themes like music, food, culture, tradition, etc. very realistically. He also gives clearance by giving the underling meaning of the novels. Amit Chaudhuri, through his young protagonist, Sandeep portrays human relationships in his debut novel *A Strange and Sublime Address*. This paper, attempts

to explicate how Sandeep views life in Mumbai and Calcutta through the nostalgic perception.

Amit Chaudhuri was born in Calcutta in 1962 and grew up in Bombay. He was a student at the Cathedral and John Connon School, Bombay. He received his degree in English Literature from the University College London, and wrote his doctoral dissertation on D. H. Lawrence's poetry at Balliol College, Oxford. He has written seven novels, *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991), *Afternoon Raag* (1993), *Freedom Song* (1998), *A New World* (2000), *The Immortals* (2009), *Odysseus Abroad* (2015), and *Friend of My Youth* (2017). He got Sahitya Akademi Award for *A New World* in 2002.

Amit Chaudhuri's first novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991) portrays a twelve years old boy Sandeep who made his visit to Calcutta from Mumbai. He stays in his maternal uncle's house to spend the holidays. Here, one can find Chaudhuri making comparison between the simple childhood life and the lives of the corporate. The reader can also see visualize the backward and the forward movement of the two cities- the fast moving life in Mumbai and simple and rustic life in Calcutta. Life in Calcutta seems to be carefree; the life in Mumbai on the other hand is well organized and perfect. Sandeep feels trapped in Bombay. The novel, thus, deals with two themes – simple joys of childhood and the evocation of a way of life.

Amit Chaudhuri's novels have got numerous most important awards and he has acknowledged worldwide acclaim for *A Strange and Sublime Address*. Indian Writers are blizzard the castle of the Indian English writing with the impetus of their brilliance, ability, and range. Yet, Amit Chaudhuri is different from the other contemporary novelists. He differs from Amitav Ghosh who writes historical novels. And, also differs from Arundhati Roy who focuses her attention on caste and love. Rather, he is on his own in writing the daily choruses of lives of India as well as abroad. He writes about the daily and minute details of life in commendable manner which other writers normally do not concentrate to mention in their writings. There is also a notable composition of narration, emotion, mood, and evocation which distinguishes him from other Indian-born writers of the present era. Amit Chaudhuri on his own admission as a novelist who fascinates in the development of the natural details of everyday life specifically the routine incidents that go broadly unnoticed and the ordinary that

hardly find place in a traditional novel. For example the writer successfully presents the minute details like Sandeep's aunt comes into the Varandah, cups of tea are kept on the tray. In addition to that three tumblers of milk are kept for the boys. Apart from that there is a tiny earthen pot. Fried Sweetmeats and orb dipped in syrub arealso found. This above description gives a vivid picture of Amit Chaudhuri's keen observation ofevents, places and things.

Amit Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address (1991)* makes a strange and sublime appeal to the readers. The novel opens with the arrival of the child protagonist, Sandeep to his maternal uncle's home in Calcutta to spend his summer holidays. His journey from Bombay to Calcutta is symbolically a journey from the solitude of his home, which is a modern flat in Bombay, to the conventional house of his uncle in Calcutta.

As a child of postmodern time, Amit Chaudhuri draws the simple conventional life in Calcutta and the busy modern life of Mumbai in a telling manner. The metropolitans Calcutta andMumbai can be regarded as microcosm for the change or growth that the other places of India would experience. It is the time, when Indian socio-political sphere was occupied with globalization alongside with computerization. In this aspect, the novel can be considered as a postmodern fiction in which the writer tries to present the fast growing nation. The novel can be regarded as a children's story since it presents in detail worlds of both the children and the eldersfrom a child's point of view.

Sandeep is in Calcutta and his everyday experiences in the city make him remember the incidents forever. When he comes to his Chhotomama's house in Calcutta, his cousins Abhi and Babla run into the house in order to avoid the newly arrived guests. Sandeep's mother presents thegifts and sarees to Abhi, Babla and Mamima respectively. Calcutta saris are nationwide popular yet, Mamima expresses her desire for Mumbai saris. Sandeep, soon becomes familiar with the two boys. They enjoy the company of one another. Sandeep is unwilling to get on with the old furnitureand the middleclass life of the house in the beginning. But later he begins to like them. The youngboy makes the comparison between the houses in Mumbai and Calcutta. The former is modern and the latter more conventional. He develops a liking towards his Chotamama's house in Calcutta. Sandeep, after adopting himself with the household of his uncle begins to enjoy the household routines done by Mamima, servant-

maids, Saraswathi and Chhaya.

Sandeep enjoys the mustard-oil massage and the cool-water bath done on him by the maid-servant. Besides, he makes a comparison between washing the clothes done by hand in Calcutta and the 'shhhh' sound of Saraswathi after washing the clothes with the help of machine in his Mumbai flat. Author speaks through Sandeep, tries to extol Indian tradition. His childhood days in Bengal and its culture are brought back to him by the aroma of mustard oil. So he writes in *A Strange and Sublime Address*:

...In Bengal, both tamarind and babies are soaked in mustard-oil, and then left upon a mat on the terrace to absorb the morning sun. The tamarind is left out till it dries up and shrivels into an inimitable flavor and a ripe old age; but the babies are brought in before it gets too hot, and then bathed in cool water. (8)

India is incomparable for its variety of foods. The different varieties of food rely on the different places, climate, traditions, and the social environments of the people in India. In Bengal, people eat rice with fish is the day-today food. The different types of spatulas and spoons are used by them to serve various dishes. Amit Chaudhuri's pen portrayal of a variety of Bengali dishes makes even the non-Bengali readers understand and relish them. This novel serves as a guide for the people who wish to visit Calcutta. He highlights the picture not only the evolution that occurs in the metropolitans but also the accumulation of dust and garbage with meaningful details. As a lover of nature, he has environmental consciousness while reviewing the dusty city.

The writer intervenes and criticizes the polluted metropolis, Calcutta periodically, though the tale is narrated from a child's point of view. As a result of modernization and industrialization Calcutta is more polluted and the novel does not fail to expose. Amit Chaudhuri is highly contemptuous while criticizing the polluted city; however the tone is mild and sarcastic. He compares the modern art with the polluted city. Both of them look similar. The different colours can be seen in modern art; one can see just blown on the entire surface of the picture to give it a shape-like appearance. Similarly, the dust deposited on the articles provides them modern art like appearance. Amit Chaudhuri is attracted and inspired by the myth of the old Bengal and its culture. All his works contain the image of Calcutta. He portrays the middle-class life of Calcutta of 1980s minutely original colour and flavor.

Sandeep has an admiration for Chhotomama who use to take magazine into the restroom and reads, sings songs while bathing, and becomes emotional when speaking about Mahatma Gandhi, Subash Chandara Bose and the Indian freedom struggle. Most importantly Sandeep has so much respect and regards for Chhotomama who interacts with children and guides them even in playful matters. According to Sandeep his Chhotamama's hassle while getting ready to go to office seems to be heroic and comic at once. This peculiar attitude in his uncle fascinates Sandeep who wants to become a writer in future.

In this novel Amit Chaudhuri illustrates expressively the lives of the middle-class people who spend their evenings gracefully. Sandeep and his cousins watch the neighbours and others from the verandah. Amit Chaudhuri has a bent of traditional mind. Hence he portrays traditional activities like singing Hindustani and dancing traditional dances of India like Bharathanatyam, Kuchipudi and Kathak enthusiastically in all his works. In *A Strange and Sublime Address*, he expounds conventional way of doing daily prayer by Sandeep's aunty with accurate details.

In the prayer room one can discover the portraits of gods and goddesses of Shiva, Krishna with his flute, Saraswati playing Veena eternally and delicately, Lakshmi accompanied by her mascot, Ganesh with his whimsical elephant-head and Durga certainly they are the gods and goddesses of Hindu religion. Sandeep's aunty after having bath goes into the prayer-room and performs pooja. The traditional way of performing pooja in Hindu families of Kolkata is highlighted by Amit Chaudhuri with a comprehensive portrayal.

Once the sweeper of Chhotomama's house comes and asks excuse himself for not coming for work for the past two days. When he is inquired, he tells that his wife delivered his fourth baby two days before. Hearing this Sandeep's mother advises him to stop with four children. The novel is standing witness to the tradition of Bengal and a document of its particularity and uniqueness. Sandeep's instinctive and acute love for culture flows out from his heart when he enjoys life in Chhotomama's house. The things and events in his uncle's house bear the conventional marks on them. The novel is poetic. It represents not only poesy of passions but also the poesy of everyday life. It affirms how even day-to-day life, ordinary things can be interesting. Everything, whether it is insignificant, ordinary and automated is expounded through images, which may be sometimes strange and delightful or sometimes unbelievable or sometimes satiric and ironic but always poetic in their suggestiveness and

intensity.

When the novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address*, is read, one may discover that he is moved between two worlds namely the world of images, colours, sounds, cadences and rhythms and the world of poetry. It appears to the reader that he is fixed to the earth securely while his head is floating in the clouds. Amit Chaudhuri in his first novel indeed has created the borderlines between the novel and poetry and makes his novel what is called, 'strange and sublime.' Amit Chaudhuri is extremely painful while seeing the changes that occurred in Indian traditional system because of many foreign invasions and westerners' entry and the arrival of western education. He believes that the traditional values have been degenerating day-by-day due to these many influences. Globalization is also one of the causes that amplified the loss of traditional values in India. In India the superstitious belief can be questioned but not the tradition.

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