



AN EXPLORATION OF THE CULTURAL SPACES IN THE NOVELS OF AMIT CHAUDHURI

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Abstract

The research examines the depiction and importance of cultural locations in Chaudhuri's works. This work emphasizes the term 'mapping cultural spaces,' necessitating an explanation and elaboration of the concepts of culture and cultural spaces. Chaudhuri's novels depict the cultural realms predominantly occupied by the middle class. Regional novels endeavour to accurately depict the realities of a certain area, capturing the authentic sense of its residents. The environment frequently serves to elucidate the character and behaviour of its residents. Chaudhuri's writing is not solely characterized by its acute perceptiveness in depicting spaces. Notwithstanding the transformations in social, religious, and political domains throughout its historical and contemporary history, the essence of Indian culture remains fundamentally unaltered. A resurgence of old cultural practices and customs has emerged, affecting several aspects of life and existence. This study aims to address this gap by analysing all of his writings through the lens of cultural places that significantly characterize his work. The subsequent chapter is dedicated to a critical examination of his non-fiction, which may elucidate his literary oeuvre.

Keywords

Cultural Spaces, Amit Chaudhuri, Middle-Class, Indian Literature, English Literature, etc.

Full Article

This research examines the depiction and importance of cultural locations in Chaudhuri's works. It aims to illustrate, examine, and investigate the significance and worth of cultural locations that subsequently enrich and broaden the thematic focuses of the books. These areas are essential for comprehending the author's thematic concerns and vision of life, facilitating a thorough knowledge and accurate appreciation of the author's work. In Chaudhuri's literature, culture serves as a predominant motif that shapes the entire tale regarding both situations and issues.

This study emphasises the term 'mapping cultural spaces,' necessitating a clear explanation and elaboration of the concepts of culture and cultural spaces. The phrase 'mapping' holds primary significance; hence, it requires clear elucidation. Mapping within the specific context of cultural spaces serves as a significant modifier, with implications that surpass the basic definition of the term. It signifies Chaudhuri's focus on the cultures of the environments he inhabits, observes, or experiences, as well as his proficiency as a writer in synthesising, evolving, and ultimately creatively representing these settings. The term cultural spaces refer to locations such as Kolkata, Mumbai (Bombay), and Oxford, where the author has resided for varying durations throughout his life. These areas encompass both residential locations and urban environments, including



streets, transportation hubs, retail establishments, parking facilities, dining venues, cinemas, and shopping malls, among others. The word cultural space nearly encompasses all significant facets of middle-class life, as adeptly depicted by Chaudhuri in his novels.

When a serious novelist adopts a specific perspective or examines subjects from a particular aspect, it typically indicates an inherent requirement to do so. The emphasis on mundane life experiences, the fixation on the insignificant and inconsequential, and the departure from the great and heroic have defined the practices of our era. Nearly all contemporary novelists have focused on the ordinary events of life and have portrayed their experiences from various perspectives. Confronting the quotidian has posed the most significant difficulty for contemporary novelists. They have experimented with many methods of representation.

Culture is the mechanism for producing meaning and concepts. It is a negotiation on the validity of meanings. Chaudhuri's novels depict the cultural realms predominantly occupied by the middle class. These locations are situated in particular regions that clearly indicate the author's acquaintance and a profound, inclusive, and nearly compulsive engagement in observation and experience. Consequently, the area where cultural places are emphasised gains significance. The portrayal of cultural places is intricately linked to the contentious question of elite vs non-elite culture, a topic fervently disputed in current cultural studies. Chaudhuri uses a balanced approach, selecting the middle class without compromising elite or non-elite (lower) culture.

The exploration of cultural settings in Amit Chaudhuri's novels involves not only the places that the protagonists occupy but also their cognitive, emotional, and expressive responses to those situations. It is via their social and personal relationships that the characters are able to establish a connection to the specific location or region in which they inhabit. Customs, values, traditions, taboos, and festivals are some of the physical, human, and functional characteristics that can be used to define this particular region or territory. In the majority of Chaudhuri's writings, the action takes place in Mumbai and Calcutta (also known as Kolkata), with Oxford and London appearing just seldom. Even though Chaudhuri is sometimes considered to be a regional novelist, his work is not in the same vein as that of Thomas Hardy. This is because Chaudhuri rarely confines himself to writing about Hard year Wessex. In contrast to the descriptions that can be found in Hardy's writings, his presentations of Calcutta, Mumbai, and Oxford almost ever address the murky qualities that are associated with these particular locations. The lives of Bengalis from the middle class, who are known as "bhadralok," are the primary focus of his attention. He has made an effort to describe the existence of these Bengalis as well as their culture in his novels and other works. Nevertheless, there is a difference between the two instances. The term "local colors" typically refers to the depiction of superficial particulars of a location, whereas the term "regional novel" refers to the depiction of more profound, intricate, and universal human characteristics and issues. Regional novels make an effort to accurately depict the realities of a particular region, capturing the genuine sense of the people who live there. Authors who are considered to be regional authors concentrate their attention on a particular location and use that location, along with the people who live there, as the basis for their stories. There is a good chance that this destination is either rural or urban. By adopting a more serious explanatory approach than that of merely providing contextual information, the regional author draws attention to and chronicles the topography, customs, and dialect of a particular location. There are many instances in which the environment serves to shed light on the personality and actions of the people who live there.

The goal of this study of Chaudhuri's writing is to conduct an analysis of the cultural environments and locations that Amit Chaudhuri has endeavoured to represent in his works of fiction, poetry, essays, and novels. His works are a reflection of the cultural ethos of the middle class, particularly Bengalis, because they focus on the physical characteristics, population,



lifestyle, customs, habits, manners, traditions, languages, and way of life of folks from his region. The Bengalis are a prime example of this phenomenon. On the other hand, this does not imply that his artwork is only a photographic reproduction of reality or a realistic account of the events that are occurring in the world today. It is his ability to imaginatively represent the cultural essence of a certain region that attracts attention to the one-of-a-kind qualities of that location, as well as the myriad ways in which it differentiates itself from other locations. Through the process of mapping cultural landmarks in a specific region, the author demonstrates their comprehension of the impact that these locations have on the relationships between the characters and the events that take place within the novels. He gives a description of the hills, forests, highways, buildings, architecture, towns, and countries that are situated in his region, focusing particular attention on the ones that are beneficial to him. His works have been constructed with the space serving as the backdrop. It plays a significant role in the progression of the story as well as the growth of personality in the characters. The spatial region interacts with all aspects of Chaudhuri's work, including the natural world, culture, mythology, traditions, norms, superstitions, topography, and environment.

In his description, he distinguishes between farmers, business owners, labourers, fairs, marketplaces, cafes, bookstores, river crossings, and coastal areas. Not only does he portray the ignorance and superstitions of the general population, but he also illustrates traditional music and dances, as well as Bengali cuisine. It is because of his personal familiarity with them that he is able to accomplish this with conviction. The culture and lifestyles of the middle class are reflected in his literature, which places a significant emphasis on domestic themes. In addition to a high perceptiveness in expressing spaces, Chaudhuri's work is distinguished by a number of other characteristics. The crystallised miniaturist style that he employs distinguishes him as a renowned contemporary author, poet, essayist, critic, and musician. Through his intimate connection to Bengali society and culture, its efficacy is enhanced and strengthened, hence enhancing its effectiveness. His youth was never lost to him, despite the fact that he was born in Kolkata, raised in Mumbai, and had his education in England. The majority of his works are set in Mumbai and Kolkata; for this reason, which is the key rationale for the setting.

With his wide knowledge, Chaudhuri is able to identify nearly all of the key components and qualities that are associated with Indian culture. The representation of this composite culture that is rooted in the notion of superiority is embodied in his literary works. Having a great attachment to India is something that Chaudhuri, like many other true Indians, possesses. One of the things that particularly inspire him is the culture of Bengal, which includes the language and literature of the region. In spite of the fact that he was born in Calcutta, he was unable to gain fluency in the Bangla language since he spent the majority of his educational years in Bombay. This is revealed by the specifics of his biography. He was able to gain the ability to read Bangla while he was on vacation at the residence of his maternal uncle in Calcutta. He had the goal of being fluent in his mother tongue. As he grew older, he developed a growing interest with Indian classical music, a desire that remained with him throughout his time spent in England for the purpose of furthering his professional education. While simultaneously studying English literature at London and Oxford, he investigated Bengali literature as well as other Indian literatures that were available in English translation.

On Chaudhuri's path to becoming a creative writer, his mentors Dan Jacobson and Karl Miller at University College, London, have been a significant source of inspiration. The assertion that he fundamentally belongs to India in terms of its culture, language, and storytelling legacy was made with a great deal of emphasis. On the other hand, he is unable to specify which of the two Indias he connects with because he also has a special connection to England as a result of the fact that he spent a significant amount of time there while pursuing his education. The conclusion of his most recent book, titled "Calcutta: Two Years in the City," is the best example of his



affection for the city of Calcutta. In this book, the city, along with its inhabitants, environments, sights, sounds, odours, and daily activities, is presented as a microcosm that represents the larger essence of Bengali culture, and by extension, Indian culture.

Being precise in one's writing is an absolute requirement for a writer. Specificity covers both the concepts of inclusion and exclusion in its understanding. While he may choose to concentrate his literary concentration on either Calcutta or Bombay, he is required to exclude all other themes and localities from his consideration. The act of exclusion is an integral part of the process of inclusion, and it is not uncommon for a writer to switch back and forth between the two activities in order to achieve different objectives. It is only when he focuses on a specific facet of his chosen inclusion that the concept of exclusion becomes meaningful. Instead of being accurate or realistic, he becomes more lyrical when he seeks to incorporate a world or area that he is not familiar with into one that he is familiar with previously. Chaudhuri's writing has been the subject of criticism and academic inquiry, with the goal of locating it within an alternative lineage of contemporary Indian English literature. There has been a great amount of time and effort committed by Chaudhuri in order to navigate this new direction, which is the alternative tradition. In light of the fact that he considers the past literary traditions of Indian English literature to be inadequate for his authorial endeavours, he has made efforts to investigate and modify them. Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, and Raja Rao had a pioneering role in the development of the first part of this school, which is known as social and metaphysical realism. Magical realism and national allegory are the two traditions that were formed by Salman Rushdie, who was followed by his successors, who replicated and improved them in an extravagant and stylish manner.

The dynamics of modernity, according to Chaudhuri, were the driving force behind the emergence of the middle class in India and around the world. Intellectuals, historians, and theorists from all around the world have all provided evidence and confirmation of this truth. Through this particular setting, he conveys his dissatisfaction with postcolonial ideology, which rejects the existence of any historical narrative pertaining to India. The proponents of postcolonial theory are unable to accept the fact that India has a history that is mostly independent of colonialism. His fundamental argument against postcolonial theory is that it denies the existence of the middle class in India. This is the basis of his argument. It is his contention that the writing that can be found in Bengali and Indian English novels is not a result of colonial influence; rather, it is the result of the conditions of modernity and industry that have evolved in India, along with the emergence of the middle class. This results in the development of a unique sensibility that is reflected in the narrative, regardless of whether it is written in Bengali or English linguistically.

The fact that Chaudhuri is a member of the wealthy upper middle class does not prevent him from identifying with the middle class. This is because he has a keen understanding of the characteristics that are characteristic of a privileged middle-class existence in India. He makes a conscious effort to differentiate himself from Salman Rushdie and other authors who advocate for "magic realism." He prioritises "plurality, polyphony, magical tales, and imagination" over "nuance, sensitivity, and introspection." As a creative writer, he has expressed his perspective and methodology, which is as follows: The India that I describe is largely lower middle-class or middle-class, with a special emphasis on Calcutta and Bengal, particularly in the context of post-independence India. Rather than showing the fanciful features of India, I am illustrating the realities of the middle class and the environs in which they live. Despite the fact that I am not talking about historical India, it is possible that my work is closely related to history. The very fact that I am writing about real people gives the impression that I am addressing historical personalities through my writing. At page 48 of *On Belonging*

Chaudhuri's unease with postmodernism, which encourages vitality and uncertainty over works and their interpretations, might be explained by the fact that he is confronted with reality.



Postmodernism is a philosophical movement that rejects the concepts of reality and overarching narratives. As a result, it is critical for any work that seeks to reflect reality. Chaudhuri is strongly concerned with aesthetics, feelings, and, most crucially, "actual individuals." For the writer, life is the text, and language is the means to revitalize perceptions of reality. Chaudhuri's work is characterized by a deep attention to these aspects. In this way, he establishes a connection with the numerous literary and cultural traditions that are prevalent in India, so gaining emotional depth and nutrition. His appreciation for noises stems from the fact that they are provocative.

It is a pleasurable experience to read Chaudhuri's works since they investigate "actual individuals" and "historical figures." His writings place an emphasis on varied degrees of local culture and cultural surroundings. The description of spatial physicality in his writings is the component that garners the most appreciation. In comparison to Bombay, Oxford, and Claremont, the milieu in Calcutta is friendlier and more intimate for him. There is a major presence of Calcutta in each and every one of his compositions. The novel *A Strange and Sublime Address* is a narrative that follows the journey of a young child through the city of Calcutta. It depicts the places, streets, and sounds of the city, which serve as the auditory backdrop of an Indian's existence. "Freedom Song" depicts Calcutta on the cusp of transformation as a result of communalism, shifts in the political climate, and economic liberalisation. "Afternoon Raag" investigates the narrator-protagonist's disconnection from the city, while "Freedom Song" represents the city in a state of disconnection from the city. Pages (Chaudhuri, *On Belonging*, 44-45). Calcutta is portrayed in *A New World* as a place that is bereft of the enchantment of youth and the poetry that is inherent in the everyday. As the story progresses, it moves back and forth between Bombay and Calcutta, with the main focus being on the protagonists as they pursue their musical and love interests. Since he was a little boy, Chaudhuri has been enthralled by Calcutta. It was the city that he had treasured when he was a youngster, and it was the streets of that city that he had spent his youth and vacations in peace and tranquillity. It was the same city that he had made his reputation as a writer. It was in 1999 when he and his family made their way back to Calcutta, which was the place where his parents had gone after they retired. Chaudhuri's love for Calcutta seems to be limitless and eternal, as he did not achieve complete fulfilment despite the fact that he had immensely popularized the city through his description of it in his writings.

As a result of his enthusiasm for culinary imagery, which he imbues with lyrical and symbolic components, he places an emphasis on the many methods of food preparation. Using his vision, Chaudhuri is able to capture images with pinpoint accuracy. No stimulus that is capable of kindling the author's imagination is able to escape his grasp. The manner in which a newspaper vendor rolls a newspaper and then throws it onto a balcony is something that he accurately registers and eloquently describes. As he draws rickshaw-wallahs, he depicts their leisure activities, which include taking naps in the rickshaw and clapping their hands to get rid of insects. In Chaudhuri's literature, the representation of places such as restrooms carries a special significance that is characterized by the fact that it is filled with meticulous details. In *A Strange and Sublime Address*, he illustrates a variety of observations, including how Chhotomama sings while he is taking a bath, how he starts his old car, how patients are positioned in the hospital, the demeanour and gestures of the taxi driver, the conversations of adolescents who are not of Bengali descent, and the actions of domestic workers.

The ability to see and record minute details is something that Chaudhuri possesses naturally, in addition to his passion for the culture of the area. Through his works, he shows the Bengali middle class, which he possesses a good sense for all matters pertaining to the lives of the middle class. He is particularly interested in the Bengali middle class. The rituals, traditions, and superstitions of the middle class, as well as the lifestyle of the middle class, are the focal points of his exceptionally creative mind. A significant part of their way of life is the performance of music,



singing, and dance, as well as communication, bathing habits, dress, and worship performances. In a nutshell, it is the prosaic everyday routine of existence that covers the various ways in which individuals interact with one another and respond to one another. The application of mustard oil to a child's skin, the laundering of garments, the wringing out of garments and hanging them on a clothesline, the serving and consumption of a variety of foods, the graffiti on walls, and the abstract patterns created by pigeon droppings are all examples of minor and seemingly insignificant details that he is able to observe. It is safe to say that when it comes to Chaudhuri's literature, the Bengali middle class is the primary, if not the only, source of inspiration. It is essential to be aware of the fact that he provides descriptions of captivating and captivating vignettes of the everyday lives of the middle class, which is the foundation of Bengali society and culture. Due to the fact that he focuses on the middle class, his works are extremely thorough; nonetheless, it is necessary to acknowledge this fact.

The novels written by Chaudhuri are marked by a significant presence of Bengali influence. Certain writers from Bengali, particularly those who write in English, employ vocabulary, themes, and moods that are highly peculiar to their culture. This is in addition to the fact that they use their Bengali identity to eroticise the East in its present form. In spite of the fact that Chaudhuri investigates Bengali culture, he avoids the inclination to romanticize the people of the East. He has unquestionably established himself as a part of the acclaimed group of Bengali authors who write in English. This group includes, amongst others, Bharati Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Sunetra Gupta, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Ruchira Mukherjee, and Jhumpa Lahiri. Many of these authors appear to be largely preoccupied with Bengali culture, which is manifested in their writing through explicit references to indigenous cuisine ("luchi, tarkari, phuchkas, jilipe, shingara," etc.), human warmth, and the intricate details of the Bengali middle class, commonly referred to as "bhadralok." Furthermore, their writings provide meticulous documentation of Calcutta moorings, frequently portrayed with such documentary precision that it may suggest these writers embrace realism as their primary style of representation. A feeling of melancholy is typically evoked when one thinks of Calcutta. A specific cultural setting, namely the Bengali bhadralok culture of the middle class, is specifically addressed by these authors. Out of all of these authors, Chaudhuri holds a position that is both exceptional and well-regarded.

The relationship that Chaudhuri has had with Calcutta is almost as long as death. His first story gives the impression that Calcutta was not a physical location but rather a mental construct. In response to a question that was quite similar to this one, Chaudhuri responded, "I recognised Calcutta as a location that felt like home." The Bengali language, which was my mother tongue and was scarcely spoken outside of my local family surroundings, was intricately connected to the concept of home. Due to the fact that I had only ever used English for communication when I was attending school, moving back to Calcutta required me to reacquaint myself with the Bengali language. During Chaudhuri's childhood, Calcutta was on the verge of undergoing a metamorphosis. It was impossible for Calcutta to stay unaffected by the transformation that was taking place in India as a result of globalization, liberalization, and privatization; thus, the city altered in order to better align itself with the prevalent trends. The Bengali culture, which he considers to be his spiritual home, has seen a great deal of change within his lifetime.

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