

*'Eh Stupid!' 'Saala!': The 'Impolite' in Chaudhuri's fiction*¹¹⁸

"Don't get alarmed if I say things. It isn't your sacred mouth".¹¹⁹

'Shrabyo amar dobe

Oderi ashrabye'.¹²⁰

("My polite language is drowned by their impoliteness.")

Arun P. Mukherjee, in her piece "Whose Postcolonialism and Whose Postmodernism?"¹²¹, makes a well-argued case for reading the 'post-colonial' literatures not just through a Euro-American theoretical apparatus which elides 'racial, cultural, historical, political, epistemological and ontological differences'¹²², but rather as those in which the 'several affiliative networks'¹²³ that have given birth to these literatures are identified and accounted for in the literary discourse of the reader. The problem which most of us face as readers reading a post-colonial text while using the socio-politico-historico-cultural text that forms the background of that text as a companion piece is the one where an assimilationist, homogenizing, postcolonial theory fails to acknowledge differences of indigenous roots of the work. Nowhere is this problem more acute than in

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¹¹⁹ D.H. Lawrence, quoted in Amit Chaudhuri, *D.H. Lawrence and 'Difference', Postcoloniality and the Poetry of the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 171.

¹²⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, *Chhara Samagra*, (Kolkata: Kalikalam, 2002), 27.

¹²¹ Arun Mukherjee, "Whose Postcolonialism and Whose Postmodernism?", *World Literature Written in English*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1990, 1-9.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 3.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 5.

the reader's encounter with the works of the Indian English writer Amit Chaudhuri: the post-colonial edifice, so easily constructed by postcolonial critics in reading the work of his more 'post-colonised' contemporaries, simply collapses in the architecture of his work. For a writer whose narrative terrain is most often the local and the particular, the 'real' instead of the fashionable postmodernist 'antireal', postcolonial theory which discounts difference in its totalizing Euro-American model, fails to supply any theoretical apparatus with which to read his work. Amit Chaudhuri himself, in his reading of the 'alternative aesthetic' in D.H. Lawrence's poems suggests a methodology in which an acknowledgement and exploration of this 'difference' and dissimilarities can lead to an enriched discourse. This is what Chaudhuri writes in locating the sense of this difference in the poems of Lawrence which he eventually goes on to relate to the 'embodiment of...the earthy, working-class dialogue or quarrel' (*Lawrence and 'Difference'*, 179).

Lawrence not only introduces, into the man-animal relationship,...which contextualizes and 'differentiates' the poem ("Mosquito", 23-32) and redeems it from a purely aesthetic space in which it can be read purely aesthetically, but also presents a trope of *reading as confrontation*, where *both reader and poet*, like human being and bat, *inhabit dissimilar contexts and thus dissimilar discourses*; and it is by *reading each other's differences* that they might comprehend each other. Confrontational reading is thus vocal and participatory; it is not passive and one sided, where the text, like the Shelleyian 'other', waits to be taken over by, identified with, and understood by the imagination. (*Lawrence and 'Difference'*, 178; emphases mine)

Ranjan Ghosh, through his (In)fusion approach, makes a similar advocacy of what Chaudhuri succinctly condenses into the phrase 'reading as confrontation'. Having spoken at length on the need for a theory where there is a 'dynamic influx of several systemic variations and epistemic interventions',¹²⁴ Ghosh talks about what he calls 'Infusion Theory' which creates this site where there is an acknowledgement of difference that is missing from the postcolonial theorists' discourse. Ghosh's theoretical discourse, then, provides a reader like me with a model to read the fictional works of

¹²⁴ See Ranjan Ghosh, ed. *(In)fusion Approach: Theory, Contestation, Limits* (Lanham, Oxford, Toronto: University Press of America, 2006), 2.

Amit Chaudhuri, not just as another post-colonial text, but rather as a site where the culture and society that he writes about, the people, literature and arts of Bengal, are actively invoked in an infusionised literary discourse. In doing so, I read his work quite against the grain of a 'post-colonial' tradition of reading; in fact, I place his body of work not as one 'between two stools', but rather in this enriched site where there is space for a healthy negotiation between two cultures of writing- the modernist tradition of British literature and the vernacular Bengali tradition of writing about the 'impolite'.

In the works of Amit Chaudhuri, we encounter, almost for the first time in the tradition of Indian Writing in English, an apotheosis of the Indian grotesque, a 'culture of the marketplace'.¹²⁵ By using Bakhtin's phrase consciously, I try to show how a kind of grotesque realism, with its roots in gross physiologism and biologism, result in the pages of his fiction being full of a 'people's laughter'. This rehabilitation of the flesh, with its strings tied to materiality, gives birth to the ugly, the monstrous, in simple words, the 'impolite', which is 'hideous' or 'rude' from the point of view of 'classic' aesthetics, that is, the aesthetics of the readymade and the completed. Chaudhuri's writing, with its (elective) affinities with modernist writing (in its fascination for the fragmented and incomplete¹²⁶), therefore, in an ironic subversion of 'classic aesthetics', does away with the binaries of 'high' and 'low' culture, which was, in some way, the progeny of modernism.

Chaudhuri's work, then, needs to be read in the context of the politics of language operational in Bengali to locate his linguistic subversional acts which create a place for the 'impolite' within his semantic discourse. Every discourse in Bengali usually gets filtered and oriented through such socio-semantic structuration to suit the needs of the 'gentleman' and necessitate the sustenance of the 'gentlemanly'. This, then, through a sleight of hand, marginalizes the language of the 'philistine' (very significantly,

¹²⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 4.

¹²⁶ Chaudhuri himself talks about the aesthetic of fragmentariness in relation to the poems of Lawrence by calling them 'textual mannequins...a composite creation of previous quotations'. *Lawrence and 'Difference'*, 75.

chhotolok in Bengali; *chhoto*: small, *lok*: people) from the ‘civilized’ pages of fiction, and even non-fiction. Utpal Dutt, one of the founder members of the Indian People’s Theatre Association, in his piece “*Ashar Cholone Bhuli*”¹²⁷, argues his case for *chashir bhasha* (‘farmer’s language’) being almost banished from narratives of Bengali fiction due to a strategic alliance between the colonizer and the colonized in the nineteenth century. The Englishman’s efforts at the democratization of education in India are legendary. But a cunning conspiracy between the Englishman and the middleclass brown sahib, the Bengali *babu*, kept the ‘farmer’ (which I use as a metonymic term here) away from enjoying the fruits of education. This was done for two reasons primarily: the first was to ensure that this class continued to speak in their own (c)rude (in the Bengali *babu*’s eyes) language; the second was that their language (*chhotoloker bhasha*, again in the Bengali *babu*’s eyes) would create a sense of ‘lack’ in them, stemming from the fact that the English sahib would ‘understand’ the middle class Bengali clerk’s *sadhu* (*sadhu bhasha* is the phrase used to talk of the polite brahminical Bengali; significantly, *sadhu* means ‘saint’ in Bangla) Bengali but would not understand his. This would inspire a sense of awe not only for the English language but, more importantly, for the *babu*’s Bengali which he would try to emulate, but with futile attempts. Often this frustration of not being able to speak (t)his civilized Bengali would create a backlash: a *gopi*, a subaltern figure, was found crying out in protest:

*Sadhu, tor Sadhubhasha rakh, Chashar mukhe bhalo sonay na, gaye jeno jhatar bari marey.*¹²⁸
 (“Saint, keep your saint’s language for yourself; this doesn’t sound nice from the farmer’s tongue; its almost thrashing our bodies with a broom”. translation mine).

This difference is made most explicit in the first language textbook that a Bengali boy learns in school, the book that Tagore wrote for beginners in the school he founded, *Sahaj Path* (“Easy Lessons”). There the difference between Gopal, the *bhadro chhele* (‘the civilized boy’) and Rakhal, the shepherd-boy, becomes apparent through the

¹²⁷ Utpal Dutt, *Ashar Chholone Bhuli*, quoted in Pradipto Bagchi, “‘*Chhotolok*’ Ar Oder Bhasha”, *Abovash*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 30th April, 2001, 54.

¹²⁸ Quoted by Dutt in Bagchi, *Chhotolok*, 54.

difference in each linguistic discourse, written, of course, from the perspective of 'polite' discourse.

Sandeep Dutta, in the Preface to his book *Slanguage* which is a glossary of contemporary Bengali slang, says

Ei somosto slang er modhye dhora poreche samay, rajniti, poriksha-byabosta, jouboner chotfotani ¹²⁹.

("These slang words hold in them the times and contemporary society, politics, the examination system and the restlessness of youth". translation mine).

I read Amit Chaudhuri's use of the 'impolite' in his fiction through this filter of the social semiotic. The subject of the 'impolite' assumes a neat binarism between the *bhadralok* (genteel) and the *chhotolok's* (philistine) language, with an obvious privileging of the polite in the pages of the Indian English Novel. When we talk of the *chhotolok's* language, we mean (and here I cannot escape the temptation of using the Bengali words, whose strong onomatopoeic effect gives us the 'literal' and 'aural' sensation of the taboo in our so-called polite discourse of the everyday): the *oshlil*, *oshovon*, *kutsit*, *itor*, *gramyo*.¹³⁰ This is the language that has been marginalized by Indian English writers, who, with their upper middle class background would rather use euphemisms and oblique phrases rather than a more naturalistic language. Pradipto Bagchi, in an illuminating short piece entitled "'Chhotolok' ar oder bhasha"¹³¹ critiques this (obviously) *bhadralok*-created division between *amader* ('our') and *oi* ('that') *bhasha* (language). He goes on to show how Tagore, while trying to adopt the idiom of the subaltern (which, in Tagore's language, significantly includes the woman; Tagore uses the phrase *grihocharini akritobesha asanskrita meyeli bhasha* to talk of 'impolite' language ('home-spun ill-clad uncultured womanish language'), uses the strainer¹³² to strain out any language that does not suit the *ruchi* ('taste', an aesthetic, with a slight connotation of the moral here) of the

¹²⁹ Sandeep Dutta, *Slanguage*, (Kolkata: Kolkata Little Magazine Library O Gabeshana Kendra, 2000), 6.

¹³⁰ *oshlil*: vulgar, *oshovon*: obscene; *kutsit*: ugly; *itor*: ; *gramyo*: rustic

¹³¹ Bagchi, *Chhotolok*, 51-56.

¹³² Bagchi's word is 'chakni', 53.

bhadralok. Amit Chaudhuri's writing is a move away from this *sadhu* tradition, an artificial literature where toilets, defecation, copulation are never spoken of (almost akin to students in India showing the little finger as a sign of going to the toilet!).

Ghosh writes, "(In)fusion theory, however, steps beyond such synthetic formations or conglomerations into the domain of a creative-reflexive-transgressive hybrid space that makes us re-understand each theory-paradigm or form in a dimension that springs from a 'competence' to enmesh and intermesh among diverse 'thought' alternatives; this becomes a strong challenge to mere disciplinary organization of knowledge".¹³³ In reading the use of the 'impolite' language in his fiction, I use the philosophy of (in)fusion theory to place Chaudhuri's work within a tradition of a Bengali literature rather than one of Indian Writing In English (which apart from a few exceptions like Rukun Advani's *Beethoven Among the Cows* or Upumanyu Chatterjee's fictional works, has chosen to maintain a kind of 'sacred space' within its pages). Describing the Ambassador in *A Strange and Sublime Address*, the narrator says,

When it ran, the engine and the ramshackle noise, like a drunk man cracking an obscene joke in a guttural dialect and laughing at it at the same time. (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 12)

The spirit of this enonce, through an intertextual infusional act almost, brings into play a similar utterance in Bengali by Rabindranath Tagore.

Gali tarey dile loke

Hashe Nidhu archokhe

Boley, 'Dada, aro bol, kan gelo juriye'.¹³⁴

(When people abuse him,

Nidhu laughs with an oblique gaze,

Says, 'Brother, use more abusive language'; translation mine).

¹³³ Ghosh, *Infusion Approach*, 3.

¹³⁴ Tagore, *Chhara Samagra*, 16

The man laughing at the obscene joke he himself has cracked in Chaudhuri and Nidhu laughing at the abuses being hurled at him in Tagore exist on the same plane. In Chaudhuri, there is no pretense to renunciation of the earthy; this earthiness comes across in the impolite, in the various genres of billingsgate, the curses, oaths, popular blazons ('INTERNATIONAL TOILET CLEANER', *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 141). The 'laughter' that originates from this degrades, and materialises; it is a kind of folk laughter. Abhi and Sandeep shouting "Eh! Stupid!" or "Faster, fat man!" (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 28) from behind the shutters or Chhordimoni's expletives – "Duffer!", "Fool", "Ass", "Imbecile", "Crowface! Retarded child! She-goat! Cow-eyed imbecile!", "O genius! O wonderworker! O helpless child!" (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 87-88) - brings to mind another of Tagore's child rhymes –

Rege mege sheshkale,
 Bole othe- 'duttur!'
 Dakbabuti dilo
 Mukhe dalkuttur.¹³⁵
 (Eventually after fuming with anger,
 He shouts- 'Oof!'
 The postman mouths abuses,
 Calling him a mangy dog!; (translation mine)

At the same time, given the 'secular' space I have created for myself as an infusionist, this 'carnival familiarity' reflected in the speech patterns takes me to Bakhtin who says,

It is characteristic for the familiar speech of the marketplace to use abusive language, insulting words or expressions, some of them quite lengthy and complex. The abuse is grammatically and semantically isolated from context and is regarded as a complete unit, something like a proverb. That is why we can speak of abusive language as of a special genre of billingsgate.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Tagore, *Chhara Samagra*, 15. 'Dalkuttur' was a slang used to refer to the British; it means a mangy dog.

¹³⁶ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 16.

Situating Chaudhuri's texts between Bakhtin and Tagore is, however, not the 'creative-reflexive-transgressive hybrid space' that Ghosh talks about. As an infusionist responding to the text and bringing all (her) intertextualities into play, I am intrigued by the politics behind language employed in the text. Chaudhuri often, through nuanced usages of language to communicate Bengaliness, employs Bengali words in other contexts, at other places. Yet, in his narratives of the impolite, he chooses to use the filter of translation. He uses 'ass' rather than 'gadha', a very common Bengali colloquialism to denote stupidity; all the abuses hurled are translated for the English language reader's comprehension. This is not only because abuses, like jokes, lose their flavour in translation; perhaps a quotation from Chaudhuri's texts will unveil some new meaning for the reader. Sandeep, the young boy living in Bombay in *A Strange and Sublime Address*, is here talking of the servant Saraswati:

Sandeep pitied her, and it hurt him to feel an emotion as elevated as pity for such a crumpled, ugly woman, *who could not even talk proper Bengali* (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 83-84; emphasis mine).

This 'improper Bengali', left untold here (although translated for wonderful effect in the short story "The Man from Khurda District") takes us back to the argument we began with, the distinction between the *bhadraloker bhasha* and *chhotoloker bhasha*. Chaudhuri, through paraphrase and literal translation of these abuses, and often by ellipsis, as in the case above, throws up the hollowness of being politely impolite, and yet aligns himself with the tradition of Tagore whose prose is littered with a patchwork of covering up and masking impolite words. In spite of this (un)conscious alignment with the modernist tradition of Tagore, Chaudhuri has his share of affinities with contemporary Bengali writing as well, with the works of Tilottama Mazumder, Sandipan Chattopadhyay, Harsha Dutta, Sukanto Gangopadhyay, Mandakranta Sen, Suchitra Bhattacharya, Sanjib Chattopadhyay, among others.

"Saala!" said Yusuf; and his mouth remained open.

"Don't abuse your brother-in-law", said Khatau, but he didn't feel like laughing. (*Real Time*, 56)

And then, Chaudhuri goes on to explain the ‘impolite’ connotations of this innocently affectionate word ‘brother-in-law’ in a ‘Note’ at the end of this collection of short stories:

The Hindi word “saala” in the story literally means “brother-in-law”; but it is also a term of abuse. In a casual sense, it suggests someone who has the tiresomeness of a brother-in-law; in a stronger vein, it carries the implication “I have slept with your sister”. (*Real Time*, 184)

This, for me, becomes emblematic of the *bhadralok* (cultured; civilized) writer’s uneasiness in dealing with the impolite: the ‘polite’ usage recorded in the *central* text with its ‘impolite’ connotations ‘hidden’ in scattered *margins* of footnotes and glossaries.

There is, I think, another way of circumventing this problem. It is by an overdose of the *bhadralok*-ness in the language. In doing so, Chaudhuri often resorts to the graphic, the visual:

Sandeep could hardly read Bengali. He could hardly write it. Brought up in Bombay; away from his own province, Bengal, he was one of the innumerable language-orphan of modern India. He was as illiterate in his language as ... as Chhaya and Saraswati. But he liked opening these classics and looking at the letters while, outside, new rain-bearing clouds moved in the sky. He saw the letters as characters, ‘characters’ in both senses of the word: ৩ was a fat man standing straight with his belly sticking out, ৩ was the fat man scratching his back, ৩ was an adolescent lately grown tall and awkward, his head bent forward shyly, ৩ was a dancer, his right leg forever lifted in a self-consciously statuesque pose. The letters were intimate, quirky, ancient, graceful, comic, just as he imagined the people of Bengal to be. (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 81)

Now, the fat man standing straight with his belly sticking out or another fat man scratching his back does not come across as very polite figures in Chaudhuri’s narrative; certainly the tone adopted is one of othering. This bi-lingual text, with the Bengali alphabets and, of course, the Bengali idiom craftily ‘infusionised’ into the English prose, “decimates”, as Ghosh says in his Introduction, “a self-enclosed singularity” which “provides a response to an ‘other’; it is becoming other at the same time”. In doing so, the hybrid polite-impolite idiom of Chaudhuri’s texts fall in line with Ramakrishna

Paramhansa's *Kathamrita* which, as Sumit Sarkar has shown, combines two radically different linguistic idioms, the rustic colloquial of Ramakrishna and the chaste formality of the new written prose of nineteenth century urban Bengal, Calcutta to be precise.¹³⁷ In *A Strange and Sublime Address*, it is the *bhadro bachcha chhele* (the civilized young boy) looking and reflecting on a graphic text, the Bengali alphabet which, in spite of all the attraction it holds for him, is the other, a 'rural' text almost, and therefore, these alphabets become, in his imagination, characters who are versions of his alterity, all that he is not.

Versions of such (im)polite alterity come across not only to the eye: often, the ear is invaded by sounds which are unfamiliar neighbours to the narrating self.

Silence descended as he drank his tea, no noise but that of passionate, noisy sips (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 101);

The 'he' is a poor Bengali relative who has come to Sandeep's aunt to ask her for assistance in finding a job. The language which describes noises while eating (*A New World*, 74) or those of snoring (*Freedom Song*, 27; *A New World*, 170) are subtly infused with the stamp of impoliteness without being categorized so.

This impolite world in Chaudhuri's fiction is also smeared and smattered with dirt and dust. Note the language which Chaudhuri uses to talk of this other world of Calcutta, the biblical intertext ('dust to dust') lurking in the background to render the impolite polite:

Daily, Calcutta disintegrates, unwhispering, into dust, and daily it rises from dust again (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 9).

Registers are mixed in this language game:

¹³⁷ Sumit Sarkar, "'Kaliyuga', 'Chakri' and Bhakti": Ramkrishna and His Times', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 27, 29 (18 July 1992): 1543-66.

The *gutters* in the lane overflowed with an odd, languid *grace* (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 75);

Or,

Whenever he sang those *songs*, the tunes cleansed the atmosphere as the trickle of water from the shower cleansed the soil and *smears of dirt* from his body (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 99);

Or,

...even while collecting *rubbish*, she looks minty and *refreshing* (*Afternoon Raag*, 43) (all emphases mine);

'gutters' and 'grace' (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 75), 'songs' and 'smears of dust' (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 99), 'rubbish' and 'refreshing' (*Afternoon Raag*, 43) are infusionised in the same sentence to polyphonise situatedness of the impolite, garbing the squalor with a mask of sophistication.

Dirt is always associated with someone else: 'the vendor's children', 'the girl of twelve...dirty...unclean look...eating bits of raw cauliflower by herself' (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 46), never with Sandeep; it is the 'lazy boy', the undisciplined servant who has 'made the kitchen filthy', not his employers (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 172); the narrating 'I' 'saw a rubbish truck' (*Afternoon Raag*, 78; emphasis mine) from the second storey flat in Bombay while the disposal of this 'rubbish' is done by someone else, the servants in Bombay (*Afternoon Raag*, 43) or even by Mandira in Oxford (*Afternoon Raag*, 103); it is the servant Haridasi, 'small Haridasi' who clears the dining table of 'bits of moist rice and salt' and throws 'the debris into the kitchen basin' (*Freedom Song*, 28-29). This associatedness of dirt and its allied impoliteness with the other, never with the self becomes most apparent in the binary Chaudhuri's narrative constructs, as in this sentence:

The state of intoxication here, broken bottles, a beggar's foul breath, is more basic than the students' social drunkenness, a state of the soul (*Afternoon Raag*, 94);

drinking brings out the beggar's 'foul breath' which automatically becomes associated with the body but the 'students' social drunkenness' (the narrator is a student) becomes, by opposition, an attribute of the mind or the soul.

Chaudhuri's tool for being impolite is most often the 'body'. Instead of laying claim to a wholesale topicality, Chaudhuri is obsessed with the body in its specificity, in its particularity. Chaudhuri's narrative lingers with and promotes the fragment rather than seeking the whole. By taking a subtle nudge at realism, Chaudhuri, takes a seeming delight in reproducing reality in its 'pieces', where the human body succumbs to morselization. With a kind of metonymic fury, the body is captured and contemplated through its beating heart with a hole, leg with limp or scattered meshes of hair. Chaudhuri is interested in portraying the body not as it is, but in an unguarded moment, when it is divorced from the real. The subaltern's body, in Chaudhuri's corporeal grammatology, persistently appears at the centre of Chaudhuri's relationship with otherness. In his unconscious word-usage, the other's body is cast as corporeal, carnal, instinctual, raw and available for use:

She (Saraswati) too was like the furniture in the house; many, many people had rested in her without knowing it (*A Strange And Sublime Address*, 84).

In his portrayal of the subaltern's body, Chaudhuri is guilty of painting them in the colours of the Bakhtinian grotesque body, associated with impurity and the socially low. The openings and orifices of this carnival body are emphasised, not its closure and finish. It is an image of impure corporeal bulk with its orifices (mouth, flared nostrils, anus) yawning wide and its lower regions, belly ('His belly beneath his tight vest, is like a distended tumour, *A Strange And Sublime Address*, 147), legs ('while their womenfolk, with saris tucked around their knees', *Afternoon Raag*, 83), feet ('saw germs, uncleanness, . . . in fingers, especially dark brown ones', *Real Time*, 26), buttocks ('the cook. . . turtle-like woman with luxuriant hips', *Afternoon Raag*, 84), and genitals are

given priority over its upper regions (head, 'spirit', reason). Being on the haunches is constantly reiterated in Chaudhuri. ('Two peasants sat on their haunches upon a kerb', *A New World*, 95). The protruding teeth, sticking out from the lips of the subaltern are a qualisign of the body's resistance to forms of closure. The protruding teeth, is also Chaudhuri's method of undermining the 'classical body' by exposing it –

Chhaya, a girl with protruding teeth (*Afternoon Raag*, 43)

And teeth that jutted from under his lip, making his face belong to the preorthodontal days (*Real Time*, 5)

- and proposing, as a possible alternative, a body of radical externality.

The transformation of Suparnekha –

She could take other forms at will (*Real Time*, 115)

- is evidence of the kinetic potential of the body, and is used by Chaudhuri to show transgression against a hegemonic 'polite' culture. This disjunction between the dominant culture's paradigms and their aberrations also shows the ambivalent presence of an aesthetic grounded in a visual representational model and a perceptual register of hearing ('It was full of fierceness and candour, but, when she cried, it did not evoke pity'. *Real Time*, 114). In Suparnekha, we see a linguistic projection of the phantasmatic body. This phantasmatic body does not have a fixed form; on the contrary, it is caught up in a process of transformation that alters its dimensions and shape, its pulsations and rhythms. This portrayal of Suparnekha (*Real Time*, 114) is evidence of what Kristeva has called 'bodily disgust', here, a loathing and rejection stemming from an oppositional grid of signification: the Aryan Sita, pitted against the Dravidian Suparnekha.

These somatic symbols translate and intensify otherness. Chaudhuri's rhetorical markers for the subaltern, therefore, becomes the short ('Nando rose from the carpet, dragging his blanket behind him, a dark four foot ten inch demon', *Freedom Song*, 3; note the word

'demon'), the Fanonian inescapable fact of blackness ('the baby was as dark as a tree-trunk', *A Strange And Sublime Address*, 40; 'Maya . . . is silent, ebony-dark', *Afternoon Raag*, 43), the (usually) thin, often skinny ('The bright tea-coloured skin was stretched upon the bones of his shoulders and his chest as lightly as a perfectly-fitting fabric; there was not an inch of extra flesh on him', *A Strange And Sublime Address*, 161), protruding teeth (*Real Time*, 37), small breasted, if women ('Sandeep thought of Saraswati's small, wrinkled breasts', *A Strange And Sublime Address*, 92). There are exceptions, of course: Rahman's big distending belly is his weapon, the subaltern's voice for speaking back:

. . . it was the big belly she resented most and felt an especial sense of rivalry with, for it seemed to ignore her sovereignty and in a sense it ruled the house (*A Strange And Sublime Address*, 187).

The subaltern's is also, often, an uncanny hybrid body-

Her odd movement forward on her haunches had an amphibian quality, half human and half of another world (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 10),

a body sculpted with villainous difference –

He has a thin face, high cheekbones, and a pencil-thin villain's moustache (*A Strange And Sublime Address*, 141),

or, a portrayal drawing upon sexually and socially recognizable contours-

. . . she buttoned her blouse, allowing the two hollows of the blouse to scoop and lift her breasts as if they were handfuls of earth (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 188),

quite divorced from the rhetoric of the erotic. The subaltern body, thus, becomes the literal 'text' on which Chaudhuri writes graphic and scrutable messages of the 'rude'.

Even when he is not negotiating with the otherness of the subaltern's body, Chaudhuri's discourse of the body remains rooted to the body per se rather than one in which the body

and its fragments are used for symbolic effect. In such a discourse, the earthiness of existence comes through with a tangible beauty: whether Chaudhuri is talking of three young boys having a bath naked (“They stood naked in front of the bathroom; their testicles hung silently and insignificantly like small, unplucked fruit. Babla’s penis was hardly visible, a sleeping beetle everyone had forgotten to notice”. *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 4) or of an old man cleaning his ear (“An old man sat all day cleaning his ear in front of a deserted petrol pump. *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 131-132), it is the materiality of his life-texts that strikes us. Yet, through the strength of associations that his prose evokes, this worldliness becomes polyphonic: the testicles of the young boys are compared to ‘small, unplucked fruit’ while Babla, the youngest boy’s penis is called a ‘sleeping beetle’. These comparisons cannot be innocent. Chaudhuri is one writer whose writing is evidence of the urban Indian English writer’s uneasiness in talking of nature. And yet here, in describing the innocent reproductive organs of these young boys, he makes a (conscious) use of fruits and insects. If we go back to Chaudhuri’s reading of Lawrence’s aesthetic, we will realize that in reading Lawrence’s description of ‘Birds, Beasts and Flowers’ as “his pantomime of nature” (*Lawrence and ‘Difference’*, 60), Chaudhuri is offering us a perfect model to critique his own writing. The ‘bricolage-model’ (*Lawrence and ‘Difference’*, 54-55)¹³⁸ that Chaudhuri constructs to read Lawrence’s writing, one which I find quite similar to Ghosh’s (In)fusion approach¹³⁹ when appropriated to understand Chaudhuri’s texts, shows us how Chaudhuri deals with this ambiguous relationship of impoliteness: the bricolage constructed by the testicles-penis description, therefore, is rendered polite by the visual image invoked, of the

¹³⁸ Gerard Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), 3-4, quoted in Chaudhuri, *Lawrence and ‘Difference’*, 55: “The nature of *bricolage* is to make use of materials and tools that, unlike those of the engineer, for example, were not intended for the task at hand. The rule of bricolage is...a double operation of analysis...and of synthesis”. And then Chaudhuri goes on to explain: “What is remarkable in this type of construction, and what concerns us here, is that, even in the ‘finished’ product, the materials of creation, the process of construction and making, the peculiar pathos and joy of gradual creation, are left open to view. The illusion that the final product came into being in a perfect form by means of an automatic authorial magic- inspiration or genius- is not allowed to exist, and neither is the production of such an illusion of paramount importance in this kind of art”. Chaudhuri, *Lawrence and ‘Difference’*, 56.

¹³⁹ Note the similarities between the ‘bricolage model’ and Ghosh’s ‘(in)fusion approach’: Genette’s ‘double operation of analysis’ has its genetic counterpart in Ghosh’s “this ‘outside’ can be made to readily penetrate into the ‘inside’” and Genette’s ‘synthesis’ its counterpart in Ghosh’s ‘assimilated several theoretical premises’.

'sleeping beetle' lying adjacent to 'small unplucked fruit' which becomes a 'pantomime of nature' (Chaudhuri's words in relation to the poems of Lawrence.). The bricoleur thereby ensures that the innocence of the supposedly impolite description is preserved. Orifices and openings are, in a similar vein, invested with a magic charm as it were, where this open-endedness of a different kind is linked with the morphology of a folktale, where entries to these unseen but heard of regions guarantee knowledge, and often wealth for the protagonist of the folktale.

He wears floppy, unsmart pyjama trousers with buttons on the front which often remain inadvertently open, creating a dark, tiny fairytale entrance. (*Afternoon Raag*, 43-44)

'The old man cleaning his ear' (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 131-132) or the 'dark, tiny fairytale entrance' on the front of the father's pyjama trousers, in spite of the quotients of corporeality involved in these descriptions, are rendered pure and polite, touched as they are, by the magic wand of some wonderland where the 'deserted petrol pump' (as setting to the 'old man cleaning his ear', *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 131-132) becomes almost a stage for some existential play and the 'dark, fairytale entrance' seems straight out of *The Arabian Nights*.

Chaudhuri's most interesting contribution, however, is in the creation of an interstitial space- analogous to the toilet- where the impolite can co-exist with the polite. I use the architectural metaphor deliberately: in that house of the Indian English Novel, rarely has any kind of space been given to the toilet, or words have been spared on defecation (his poem "Education"¹⁴⁰), copulation, urine. Hardly has any Indian writer in English ever written so eloquently about toilets and sweepers, urine and shit, drains and dust. Chaudhuri's contribution lies in not just writing about these unwritten and unseen spaces and performances; his real credit lies in writing about them, not just as evocative metaphors (which postcolonial writers fashionably do) but in using them as tropes of the 'real' everyday lives that we live (the simple 'everyday' which most postcolonial writers with their political agendas so easily ignore), keeping them realistic, like Marcel Duchamp's 1917 painting of the clean white urinal titled *Fountain*. We are with his

¹⁴⁰ "Education", in *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005), 71.

characters everywhere, even in those 'unsanctioned' places of polite prose- we see them bathing, copulating, urinating, shitting, all these carnivalistic activities which destroy any kind of superficial distinction between actor and spectator. 'While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it'.¹⁴¹

What is interesting also, after having seen Chaudhuri's uncomfortable affair with otherness in terms of the relation of the impolite to language usage, food or dirt, is the fact that it is not only the subalterns who are associated with sweat and shit. Chaudhuri does create socio-cultural borders in the narrator's mindscape; imagined geographical demarcations exist.

...it was hard to believe she lived across the railway lines, in the clump of huts called the basti, from which whiffs of excrement rose on windy days....Servants and their children, rickshawallas, people from the basti, had now gathered in the field to watch the seenema (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 9-11).

The spaces which servants and rickshawallas inhabit are homogenized into a 'basti' where the 'railway line' becomes a border of civility. Inevitably, it is a 'young man, useless and unambitious, perhaps distantly related to the family' (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 16) who would have 'patches of sweet darkening his colourless shirt' (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 16) or Saraswati who would use a 'wet, dirty-looking rag' (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 23). In quite the same vein, the figure of the sweeper with his broom is a recurring figure in Chaudhuri's fiction, a trope for the dirty subaltern responsible for the other's cleanliness. This sweeper is inevitably ugly.¹⁴² Chaudhuri writes eloquently about toilets and sweepers but there is a distinct politics behind doing so. The toilets of the narrator's house(s) become a part of the descriptive act only after they *have been cleaned* into spotlessness or *are in the process of being cleaned*, never before the cleaning operation.

¹⁴¹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 7.

¹⁴² "He was tall and ugly, and his eyes were always bloodshot. He had an angry look about him, but he wasn't an angry man at all; simply a dirty and a surprisingly clumsy one". *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 39.

“As I was leaving, I saw Panna the sweeper drifting about in the hall. He comes at midday to *clean* the toilets. I had seen him today rigorously *scrubbing* a wash-basin with a rag, *scouring* its valley, *skimming* its plateau, *rubbing* and *kneading* the knobs on the taps. He goes from room to room, with a bucket and a jhadu, a broom made from the firm, fine lashes of a coconut tree, which splay in bunched, pointed needles at the end like a punk’s hair. He *cleans* the commodes with Harpic liquid, which has been recently introduced to India bearing the legend, INTERNATIONAL TOILET CLEANER. (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, pp. 140-141; emphases mine)

Note the words used to describe this operation: ‘clean’ (used twice), ‘scrubbing’, ‘scouring’, ‘skimming’, ‘rubbing’, ‘kneading’. This is, of course, in sharp contradistinction to ‘other’ places. The streets in London are said to be littered everywhere with ‘dog-shit’ (“Be careful you don’t step on the excrement”, he said. ‘London is the dirtiest city in Europe, dog-shit everywhere’. *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 156)¹⁴³ and a ‘public piss’ is labeled as the ultimate pleasure for ‘them’, the other (“For *them*, recreation is the desolately green area of the Headington Parks, pleasure a public piss in a public toilet, and misery an hour spent in the launderette. *Afternoon Raag*, 94; emphasis mine). The ‘ing’ words stand in opposition to the ‘is’, the ‘be’, the present continuous against the static verbs used in case of the other.

Chaudhuri’s pages, littered with shit, vomit, urine or snot, become a postcolonial space where the post-colonial writer in English negotiates his modernity through a transactional relation with a similar Bengali tradition, namely the stories of Gopalbhar, the famous jester of the eighteenth century. Reading these two passages together will help me to make my point:

But no, she had just urinated on her father’s shirt with an engrossed look on her face. By doing so, she proclaimed her return to reality. The father grumbled as a wet patch on his shirt spread

¹⁴³ This can also be seen as the post-colonial writer’s code of associating squalor and shit with the ‘polite’ coloniser’s country for though Calcutta and the ‘basti’ are described as dirty or as places from where the smell of shit wafts through the air, shit is never shown to be scattered on the streets of this Third World city.

and grew larger. No one was embarrassed. How could one be embarrassed about a baby urinating? The *baby* was not embarrassed. Nor did she seem to have done it with anything but the best of intentions. Besides, there was a rumour that baby's urine is particularly innocuous, even pure, like spring water. (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 68)

One day Gopal was out with two of his fathers-in-law on a journey, one walking on his left, the north, the other on his right, the south. When Gopal decided to urinate facing southward, one of his fathers-in-law quipped, "What are you doing Gopal? Perhaps you don't know that it is outside the scriptures for a Hindu to urinate facing south during the day".

The other father-in-law said, "I have heard that you can't even pee facing north as well".

Gopal retorted, "Those words come from the learned. I am a rustic who doesn't care much for anything. I can urinate in any *mukh*; the *mukh* which my older father-in-law used, I urinate in that *mukh*, the *mukh* which my younger father-in-law used, I urinate in that *mukh* as well."¹⁴⁴

The use of the myth of the urine of a baby having therapeutic properties and the direction in which Hindus are not supposed to urinate are both used in a similar way in these two narratives: the earthiness of the myth acts as the source of humour without any rationalistic pretence to show up the uselessness of these myths although it is the mocking ironic tone hiding in the narratives that give birth to the folk laughter in these scenes. Let us read two other passages from these two sources again:

I would think benignly of my mother's good health, and how she suffers from nothing but constipation, how for three days she will go without having been to the toilet, with an abstracted look on her face, as if she were hatching an egg. Secretively, she will concoct a mixture of Isabgol and water, and stir ferociously before drinking it. Then, one day, like a revelation, it will come, and she will have vanished from human company. (*Afternoon Raag*, 12).

Gopal said, "Should I speak, my lord? To explain how happy I am, let me give you an example. Under the pressure to shit but with no appropriate place around, it can be very tricky. After some lapse of time, when you finally get the chance to relieve yourself, you are flushed with an

¹⁴⁴ Ujjal Kumar Das, *Gopalbharer sera ekso galpa*. Kolkata: Nirmal Book Agency, 2000, 56. All translations from the original Bengali are mine. The Bengali word 'mukh' is used in a dual sense here where it means both the mouth and the direction thereby intensifying the sting of impoliteness.

inexplicable joy. You are really relieved. Today I am experiencing a similar sense of joy. Oh! What a pleasure!¹⁴⁵

What is interesting is not just the similarity of their content (the ‘relief’ given by shitting!) but the matter-of-fact ease with which these biological processes of the body, always denied entry in ‘polite’ conversations, are infusionised into the narrative where the discourse of the everyday is celebrated as a discourse of literature. This only reiterates my argument of how Chaudhuri’s writing, especially in relation to the impolite, has its strong links with folk literature.

As Bakhtin has shown in his study of Rabelais, the evolution of folk culture gradually ‘brought the world close to man, gave it a bodily contrast to the abstract and spiritual mastery sought by Romanticism. Images of bodily life, such as eating, drinking, copulation, defecation, almost entirely lost their regenerating power and were turned into “vulgarity”’.¹⁴⁶ In Chaudhuri, food and all that it signifies in the realm of the spirit is subverted, the myths and their associations are turned on their heads. Fish, its diverse connotations in *The Bible* and in Bengali socio-religious literature, come to be set as a counterpoint to Chaudhuri’s invocation of the relation between fish and a ‘woman’s sex’:

...here, even if your eyes should be closed, or if you should be entering the city from the direction of the airport, you will be woken by the smell of dried or rotting fish, a strong but pure odour blown inland, bitter and sharply intimate as the scent of a woman’s sex”. (*Afternoon Raag*, 21)

Now this utterance in *Afternoon Raag* becomes an infusionised site given Chaudhuri’s relation with the poems of Lawrence and his analyses of them. In writing of the ‘parodic, polyphonic fabric’ of the poems of Lawrence, Chaudhuri quotes a brief extract from Lawrence’s poem “Fish” and then follows it with an analysis. I shall quote from his text to make my point:

¹⁴⁵ Gopalbhar, 15.

¹⁴⁶ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 39.

The fish whose divinity is revealed at the end of the poem-

In the beginning

Jesus was called The Fish...

And in the end (170-3)

- is also, contrarily, the 'lout on an obscure pavement'. The note of reverence, worship, and celebration is heard in these poems, but also the sound of laughter, a laughter that encloses these seemingly 'godly' creatures with a carnivalesque text, in which they wear masks and costumes and parody their own deities (*Lawrence and 'Difference'*, 70-71).

Chaudhuri, then, in his fictional narrative is doing exactly what he, in this critical assessment proves Lawrence to be doing. If Lawrence infuses the 'godly' connotation of the fish with the 'carnavalesque', Chaudhuri, in comparing the smell of dried fish with the scent of a woman's sex is also doing the same: inverting a myth by re-investing it with what is supposedly impolite, a trope usually chastised rather than celebrated. In writing about food then, Chaudhuri's technique is just a reversal of the one he employs to render impolite language polite; while in the latter the impolite or ugly is 'purified' through the conscious use of words from an opposite register, in writing about items of food, he fills the gap between the two registers by 'profaning' it with almost a Baudelairian aesthetic of the ugly:

For, not far away from the sweet-smelling, moist floors of the florists' were the butchers' shops with sticky larders and clotted blood, dead pheasants swinging upside down from hooks, fragrant carcasses, pig's livers and trotters (*Afternoon Raag*, 102).

So while dried fish reminds the narrator of a woman's sex, the 'sweet-smelling moist floor of the florists' is posited against the "butchers' shops with sticky larders and clothed blood..." (note the language game through which Chaudhuri's pen beautifies the ugly, the pseudo-alliterative counterpoint of 'sweet-smelling' with 'sticky', similar to the 'rubbish-refreshing', 'gutters-grace', binary I have pointed out earlier) and 'chilli sauce' with 'something that flows in drains' ("They would shovel up the noodles with

tablespoons after they had put some of Han's Chilli Sauce in it, thumping the end of the bottle with the palm of their hands until their palms became red and thick drops of the sauce, pale green, like something that flows in drains, had fallen out sluggishly", *Freedom Song*, 38) which again has its modernist Joycean parallel.¹⁴⁷

Postcolonial writing, as critics have shown, is full of the fetish for the impolite. But fitting Chaudhuri into this neat formula is problematic. For Chaudhuri's writing, in using the impolite without any conscious political agenda (except perhaps the simple dictum of being true to life!), also subverts the Marxist dialectic of 'the organic versus the organised'. Chaudhuri, with his elite education and background, also shows up the hollowness of such theories which grow from the 'philosophy of "natural genius"' which tries to say that only 'uneducated' writers, unlike those of the polite and court classes, somehow retained a spontaneity and inspiration which came out through the 'impolite'. Chaudhuri's aesthetic of impoliteness, *matir kachakachi* (a Bengali phrase which means closer to the earth, says it better), then, derives from his affinities with the modernist aesthetic epitomized in Lawrence's words:

Ask for the whiteness which is the seethe of mud, ask for that incipient putrescence which is the skies falling, ask for the never-pausing, never-ceasing life itself (*Lawrence and 'Difference'*, 149).

Chaudhuri, in writing about Lawrence's aesthetic reads the invocation of 'mud' and 'putrescence', traditionally associated with the low life, as 'tropes for a dynamic that has not *hardened* into culture as 'property' (*Lawrence and 'Difference'*, 149-150). In using the tropes of mud in his fiction, he makes available for himself as a literary critic-writer, the same connotation of kinesis rather than the static or finished.

¹⁴⁷ "I always thought that sort of thing looked both poisonous (some of these sauces have been banned because of the chemicals in them) and irresistible; I have also been both repelled, and oddly fascinated, by drains. Joyce's image of the snot-green sea has also always fascinated me. But I was trying also to describe what chilli sauce seemed to me like in memory". (Amit Chaudhuri, email correspondence with the author).

There were days when she wandered around the house with mehndi in her hair, which smelled like mud or manure till she had washed it off (*Freedom Song*, 55);

The rigger tryouts had taken the trouble, on-field, during the scrum, to wrestle and hug the earth completely and, by then end of it, to return with an unfaultable cosmetic exterior of dirt, sweat, and plastered hair (*Real Time*, 16).

As these quotations prove¹⁴⁸, Chaudhuri's aesthetic is one which privileges the mud over stone, the incomplete over the complete, becoming over being.

The impolite has often been used as a marketing strategy. *Karon ashilota lavjonok*,¹⁴⁹ 'because the obscene and the impolite are profitable', was the judgment that Justice Sengupta gave when the famous case between Samaresh Basu and Amal Mitra came to the lower court. Advocate Amal Mitra had filed a case against the Bengali novelist Samaresh Basu for using obscene and impolite language in his novel *Prajapati* which was a realistic depiction of the life of a young man called Sukhen who among many things, hated hypocrisy, and polite language was, for him, one of the tools of the perpetration of this social hypocrisy. Yet Chaudhuri, in spite of using the impolite in his fiction, cannot be accused of using obscenity as a marketing ploy; rather his fiction, by virtue of being infusionised sites where the polite and impolite can happily co-exist, questions the politics of these watertight categorizations of genre. In writing about the base materiality of Indian life, the sweat, scum, spittle and shit, Chaudhuri brings in a 'new world' of the Rude into the tradition of the Indian English Novel, which, in its prim and 'polite' prose has avoided the 'material bodily lower stratum' of Indian life, where the atmosphere of the carnival, with its joyous carnality and communality enters its pages, which had been almost lost in the literature of the coloniser's language. In doing so, Chaudhuri makes an affirmative link with the impolite that abounds in the Indian

¹⁴⁸ Both the *mehendi*-mud on the hair and the dirt on the boys are meant to be washed off rather than preserved as the complete.

¹⁴⁹ *Sotyikarer shilpokolar janasamarthan kam. Suthorang sekhetre ei adaloter rokhakoboj niye ashilil sahityoi sabaikhe chapiye jabe*, ('True Art does not receive popular acknowledgement. So 'obscene' literature shall sweep everything polite out of its way through the protective shield of the court') were Justice Sengupta's words. Quoted in Samaresh Basu, *Prajapati*, (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers Private Limited, 2003), 169.

vernacular (or *bhasha*) literatures; the private chamber soirees that fill the pages of the Indian English Novel, suddenly, through Chaudhuri's pen, turn into communal festivities, into a Bakhtinian 'marketplace', into one great infusionised impolite Indian bazaar.¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ The 'bazaar' with its *variety* of wares on sale, with the *freedom* of choice available to the consumer, the implied notion of *free* and *democratic* trade in operation, along with, of course, the *limits* of the consumer's wallet, is, for me, the greatest trope for an (in)fusionised discourse. Chaudhuri, in reading Lawrence's *Mornings in Mexico*, makes some interesting observations in this context. After quoting from the description of the bargain in the Mexican marketplace, Chaudhuri says: "The market-place becomes a site where signifiers are freely circulated, exchanged, almost borrowed, amongst human beings who are there as much to be with each other as they are to buy and sell....The language of aesthetic response in Western culture is not very remote in its structuration from the language of transaction located in the economy of that very culture. The writer produces a work, and, in a sense, owns it; the reader takes ownership by decoding it and deciding its value. Once more, a movement from the signifier- the work of art- to the signified- its value or meaning- is necessarily involved, and both writer and reader, fulfilling their specialized jobs of producing and valuing, are linked in a relationship that mirrors the one between the buyer and the seller. (It is instructive to note how these models are themselves similar in structure to Saussure's basic model of linguistic communication, comprising 'the addresser' and 'the addressee'.)". Chaudhuri, *Lawrence and 'Difference'*, 141-142.