

Preface

It is a matter, at once, of joy and trepidation, to write a doctoral dissertation on the works of a writer on whom such detailed study has not yet been attempted. But this enthusiasm is guarded, for writing a doctoral thesis is a lonely task, almost like playing chess without a partner, and one feels the urge, time and again, to be assured that one is on the right path. My journey was made lonelier by the fact that this road had not been taken earlier, thus leaving me without knowledge of landmarks and signposts. Criticism in this area has been sparse; critics have tended to concentrate on individual texts written by Amit Chaudhuri or have engaged with him in an impressionistic manner, collecting their thoughts into essays. I, therefore, had to – and this wasn't really a matter of choice – concentrate on the works of Chaudhuri, taking them as a spool from where to begin flying my kites.

When I first thought of writing my doctoral dissertation on his work, the world was younger; we were younger too, the writer and I. Chaudhuri had written only (a word which I use retrospectively) four novels. These texts had given me a pleasure that I had not found in the (then) claustrophobic domain of Indian Writing in English; they had provoked me, almost with the sense of a challenge, to put that pleasure into a discourse. This, I had realised almost as soon as I had decided to embark on the journey, would not be an easy task. His writing was difficult to hang from the pegs of a prevalent postcolonial discourse. I also use the word 'only' to mean something else – I thought it would be easy to read four books (thin, but certainly not "lightweight", as Chaudhuri describes Indian English Novels in *A New World*).

Since then, however, Amit Chaudhuri has published *Small Orange Flags*, a book of essays on the disappearance of a secular space in contemporary India, *Real Time*, a collection of short stories, and *St Cyril Road and Other Poems* and *D.H. Lawrence and 'Difference'*, his doctoral dissertation on the poetry of Lawrence. A novel and a book of essays on literary criticism are due to be published soon. It is difficult for a doctoral

student to keep pace with a living writer. Not only, as I realised during the period of my research, is his aesthetic constantly evolving, new works (essays, stories, poems) continue to appear, thereby delaying the process of 'final' examination of the writer's work. Like Chaudhuri's work, my thesis continued to be in process. My task was made even more difficult by the fact that the writer who was the subject of my investigation was also a musician, a singer and a composer, someone who refused to be seen as only one part of a hyphen, insisting, to his readers and listeners, that his music and his writing could not be seen as separate from another. This proved to be a difficult task again for listening to music is one thing and learning to talk about it is another. It took me time to develop a vocabulary which would allow me to do that. This, as I was to realise, was an extremely enriching experience for gradually, during the course of many listens, I began to discover that the sensibility at work in the novels and poems was the same as that which moved the music composer. And this discovery added one important dimension to my investigation of the semiotic at work in his writing.

When I had registered my title, therefore, it had been only (and now I can see how limited it was) "The Optic and the Semiotic in the Novels of Amit Chaudhuri". Amit Chaudhuri, at that time, had only written fiction. With the appearance of his later books, not only did I feel the need to change the perspective of my work (which I shall talk about a little later), I needed to change the title I had begun with, as well. In the meantime, however, I got a scholarship to travel to Europe where I consulted libraries and spoke to people who were engaged in similar research, though on other writers, musicians and dancers. The more I read and wrote, the more I began to realise the limited nature of my initial choice of title. Being away from the university (and the country) for two years meant that I had no option of putting in a plea for a change of title. Having returned here, I found that such a change involved a lot of time, something that I was no longer in a position to buy anymore, having to return to my teaching job in the West Bengal Education Service in a month's time. Also, the deadline for submission of my thesis was very near. I have, thus, been forced to continue with my earlier title though my work includes studies of his poetry and music, integral components of his oeuvre.

My approach to Chaudhuri's work has also evolved over time. Fresh out of university, it is easy for a student in his or her early twenties to be easily influenced by flamboyance: the same thing happened to me too, when I became a victim to the feverishness of Anglo-American literary theory. I began to read Chaudhuri's works through the many filters these theories taught me. It is easy to get carried away by the returns that a naïve student of literature might get from these theories. For these theories, as I was to discover, are, most often, like bubble gum: the bubble takes on the contours of the chewer's mouth, without any allegiance to context. But I began to tire of them soon, just as I began to tire of an unimaginative postcolonial discourse that ignored, or at least was indifferent to, the construction and continued practice of the many internal colonialisms in the nations that these theories discoursed.

One of the first people who pointed out the need to place my work within the framework of historicity was Professor Udaya Kumar (then at the University of Delhi) who was kind enough to read and comment, in great detail, about my synopsis and proposed plan of work. It was possible to study the optic and the semiotic in Amit Chaudhuri's work with success but, in my enthusiasm about making discoveries in the text (and sometimes outside it), I had, right at the very beginning, forgotten to ask myself the most important question. What did the semiotic prove, after all?

Discussions with the writer and a re-framing of perspective soon solved the problem for me. Or at least part of it. Chaudhuri, I had discovered (and he had corroborated), had a visual imagination. He has even said in an interview that he would have liked to become a filmmaker. So I asked myself – do his visual tropes betray his allegiances? And I found that they did. Postcolonial studies has made a habit of recording hybridity with the religiousness of a man documenting a census-roll; I was not looking for that in Chaudhuri. Here was a writer whose words teased the eye; I, therefore, needed to create a discourse which would explain the optic at work.

The scholarship to study in Europe gave me the opportunity to visit some of the best art museums in the world; paintings I had so far seen (most often in unimpressive black and

white) only in books and magazines came alive on walls; Inge Rusen, a painter herself, almost gave me a course in the history of Western art. I began, then, to find similarities between the European modernist painters and Chaudhuri. I began to see where Chaudhuri's optic had come from, how it had been conditioned by long years of stay in England, his exposure, to borrow a word from the optics, right from his childhood, to these painters and their aesthetic. But this was not the only tradition to which he laid a claim. His allegiances are also to figures whose roots, in however qualified a manner, lie in the Bengal Renaissance. His assimilations of these traditions is, however, almost never, completely wholehearted; the new, in his work, is at once born out of dialogue and critique, a lover's quarrel with neighbours' wives.

This doctoral dissertation, then, is an exploration to trace, through the semiotic, not how hybrid a creature the writer Chaudhuri is, but to locate the traditions that have come together, a strain of British modernism and Bengali modernity, to produce a literature that is not a simplistic writing back, but one that is situated in the cusp of a 'writing to' and a 'writing from', as well as a 'writing in'.