

The Text as Rhizome: Amit Chaudhuri's Theory of Fiction

I'm uncomfortable beginning at the beginning. It's not because I'm clever, but because it's a difficult thing, writing.⁴⁶

I began with my third volume, then proceeded to my second, and last of all grappled with the first.⁴⁷

The implied non-circularity here, intones what Bloom would ascribe as 'usurpation' and Derrida as 'curve'. The nonlinearity and multilaterality of narrative open up the critic's prerogative to 'usurp' as Amit Chaudhuri's thought-formation formalizes a system-in-process, rather collage in motion. His narratology, thus, undermines historical time and substitutes for it a new construction of temporality that Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth calls "rhythmic time".⁴⁸ Chaudhuri plays hopscotch with events in historical time and, in the process, the structure of his novels, which become an embodiment of his subjectivity, replaces the Cartesian cogito ergo sum with a different subjectivity whose manifesto might be Cortazar's "I swing, therefore I am".

As we read and decipher, we co-invent Chaudhuri's text. The constant in the narrative of all his novels is no longer the time of history, the time of Newton and Kant, the time of clocks and capital but time which, in murdering the linearity of narrative, abandons altogether the dialectics, the teleology, the transcendence, and the putative neutrality of

⁴⁶ Amit Chaudhuri, *Real Time. Stories and a Reminiscence* (London: Picador, 2002), 74.

⁴⁷ William Godwin, *Things As They Are or the Adventures of Caleb Williams* ed. Maurice Hindle (London: Penguin, 1988), 350.

⁴⁸ Elizabeth D. Ermarth 1992. *Sequel to History* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 14.

historical time. Unlike the syntactic style, Chaudhuri's narratology follows, as is apparent, the paratactic style, which thrives by multiplying the valences of every episode and by making every arrangement a palimpsest rather than a statement, rather as poetry does when it draws together a rhythmic unit by means of repeated sound or rhythm.

The absence of a never/ever pair leads to the trajectory of the rhizomatic narrative in Chaudhuri. Also due to the lack of sequential and consequential descriptions (like the party game in which people around a table take turns to write a line of a story, the other lines of which are supplied, in secret, by the other participants), the reader as addressee has to perceive a non-random connectedness in the sequence of events reordering 'transformations' in which events would happen in the real world in a particular sequence (ABCD) so that they are encountered in the discourse in different possible orders BACD, CABD, DBAC, or the different permutations and combinations possible. Let us take the instance of *Afternoon Raag* with the chapter sequences first and then the actual temporal sequence.

Chapter One : Student life in Oxford : A

Chapter Two : Narrator's life in Oxford (Shehnaz and Sharma) : B

Chapter Three : Mandira's life in Oxford (2 years after the narrator's arrival) : C

Chapter Four : Parents' life in Bombay : D

Chapter Five : The narrator and Shehnaz in Oxford : E

Chapter Six : Sohanlal's music-lessons : F1

Buying the first tanpura : F2

Chapter Seven : Narrator's life with Sharma (before Shehnaz) : G

Chapter Eight : Moving around Oxford : H

Chapter Nine : The room in Oxford : I

Chapter Ten : Life in Oxford and escapade to London : J

Chapter Eleven : Parents, Chittrakaki, Chhaya and Maya in Bombay : K

Chapter Twelve : Sohanlal's and Mohanlal's music lessons in Bombay : L

Chapter Thirteen : Chhaya, Maya, Sindhi widow in Bombay : M

Chapter Fourteen : Parents in Bombay : N1

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- Parents in England before the narrator's birth : N2
- Chapter Fifteen : Narrator with Shehnaz in Oxford : O
- Chapter Sixteen : Shehnaz in Oxford : P
- Chapter Seventeen : Mandira in Oxford : Q
- Chapter Eighteen : Oxford : R
- Chapter Nineteen : Parents, Chittrakaki in Bombay; shifted to new house : S1
Narrator in new house in Bombay : S2
- Chapter Twenty : Parents moved from Bombay to Calcutta : T1
Father's life in Calcutta as Student : T2
Father's life in East Bengal : T3
Trip to father's aunt's son in DumDum : T4
- Chapter Twentyone : The 'other' England : U
- Chapter Twentytwo : Mandira, Shehnaz and Sharma in Oxford : V1
Covered Market : V2
- Chapter Twentythree : Sohanlal as a boy in Rajasthan : W1
Sohanlal's performance in front of the narrator : W2
- Chapter Twentyfour : Bombay : X
- Chapter Twentyfive : Calcutta : Y1
Narrator as a child in Calcutta : Y2
Narrator back from Calcutta to Oxford : Y3
Narrator in Calcutta writing to Shehnaz in America : Y4
- Chapter Twentysix : 'She' with 'him' in Oxford : Z1
'She' going back : Z2
- Chapter Twentyseven : Narrator's first day in Oxford : £1
Narrator's second day in Oxford; meeting with Sharma : £2
Narrator reading Lawrence with Sharma : £3
Narrator remembers his mother cooking sweetmeats for him : £4

The temporal sequence of *Afternoon Raag* should, therefore, be
 T3→T2→N2→Y2→D+N1+K+M→F1+L→:£1→£2→G→B→E+O+P→C+Q→V1

→S1→S2→Y4→Y3→£3→£4

T1→T4

W1→W2→L+F1→N1

V1→Z1→Z2

A, R, H, I, J, U, V2, X, Y1 are, mostly, atemporal.

The atemporal cognates (A, R, J, I, H, U, V2, X, Y1) act as catalysers that fill in the narrative space between nuclei. These descriptions are described as parasitic by Barthes, areas of safety and rest. W1 → W2 → (F1 + L) or (C + Q) → V1 → Z1 → Z2 act as kernels, hinges or alternative path openings. The descriptions of Oxford, Bombay, Covered Garden, London, Calcutta, the 'other' England as well as the different narrative trajectories of Mandira, Shehnaz, Sharma or Sohanlal act as kernels on one (sub) plot but as satellites in the scheme of the entire plot. Chaudhuri, thus, by working against the teleological conception of plot structure resorts to anachronies (T3 → T2 and so on), analepsis (N2, Y2) and prolepsis (C, B). Although *Afternoon Raag* opens with the atemporal sequence of student life in Oxford, Chaudhuri performs an external analepsis in the text (A before T3 and T2) and the ensuing series of detailed scenic presentations linked by abrupt spatio-temporal jumps (V1 → W1, for example) to create the effect of 'discontinuous continuity'. Using distal deixis (note the use of the /that in *Afternoon Raag*), Chaudhuri brings in different codas (A, R, J, I, etc.) to

bring the narrator and the listener back to the point at which they entered the narrative.⁴⁹

The diagrammatic representation of the narrative structure approximates, as can be seen below, a rhizome. (Note the overlapping 'little' narratives as well).

FIGURE 1.

This structure is emblematic of the embedding relations that an author creates: the 'single story' in *Afternoon Raag* can be seen to have several stories within it, and linguistically,

⁴⁹ William Labov, *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1973), 365.

like clauses, these can be (as shown above) , coordinately chained together or subordinately embedded , one within the other (F1+L).

The foundation of the geometry of Chaudhuri's fiction is the surface, not the point. In this system, as man moves about, he alters the forms which surround him. The ahistorical sequence of running backward and forward, between Oxford and Bombay (*Afternoon Raag*) brings into the 'same' medium two incompatible frames of reference, thus, deconstructing the one with the other, specifically two different experiences of temporality, analogical with the computer clock on Jayojit's lap top which shows the time in Claremont even in Calcutta (*A New World*). The internal and external fields of his novels constitute two parallel planes, but their geometry is non-Euclidean for the planes overlap at many points without opening into one ; that is, many referents are shared by the two planes, thus possessing a 'dual referential allegiance'.

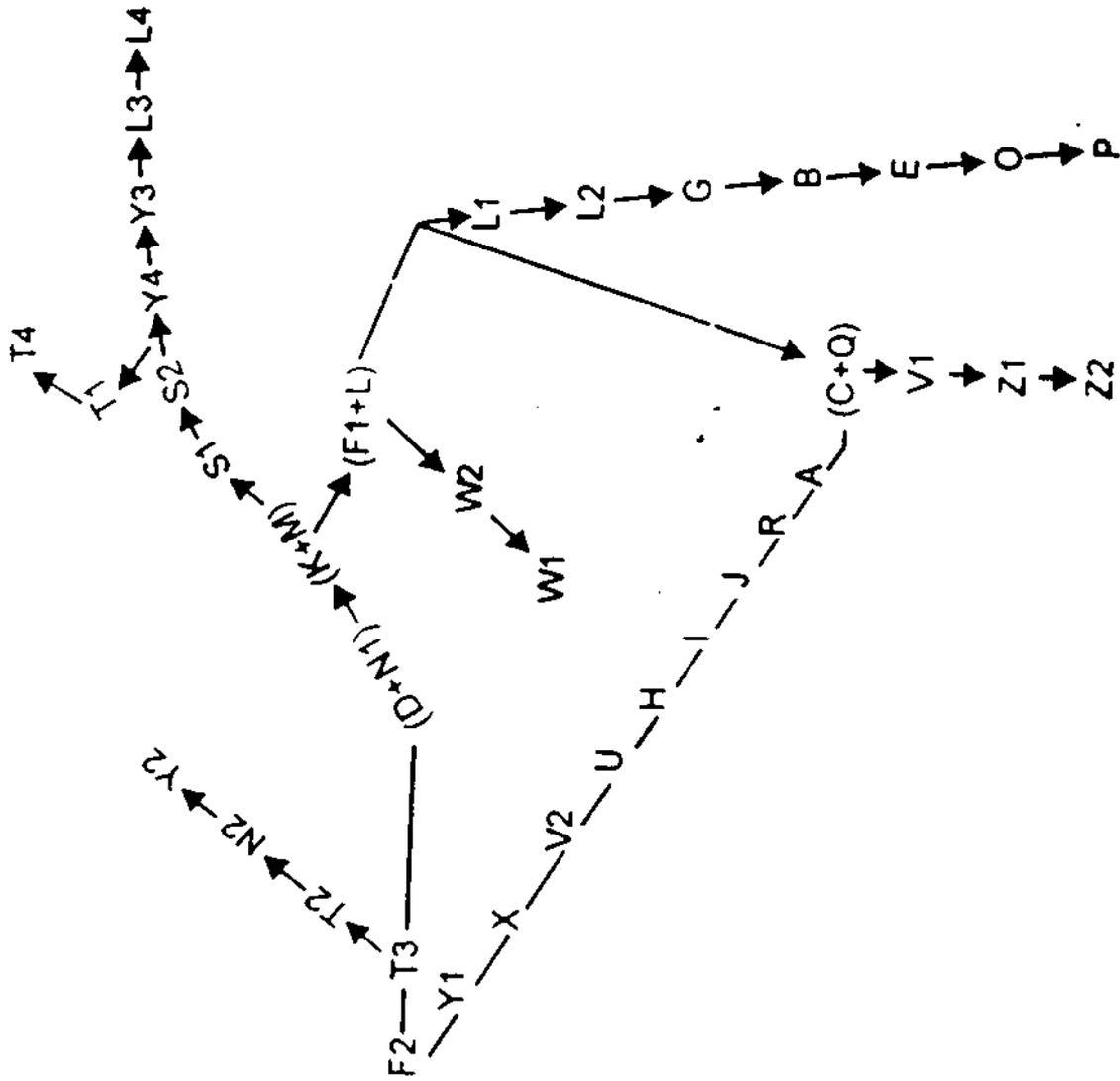
The network of Chaudhuri's novels – let us take the instance of Chaudhuri's *Freedom Song* with Khuku, Mini, Bhaskar, Mohit, Shib, Piyu, Shantidi, Puti, Manik, Nando, Uma, Bhola, Pulu, moving between chapters,

swaying, this *swing* in which confused materials goes about taking shape⁵⁰

- differs from the structure of the 'conventional' novel because it is headless and footless; to use Cortazar's words, it has no 'heart' or 'centre', no 'origin' or 'end' but instead, and like a language, only pattern repeating itself . Details in the novel – Bhaskar's play, Little's, Mini's illness, Bhaskar's marriage – function paratactically as building blocks for reader construction. Freed from the controlling teleologies of historical hindsight, the narrative can move without going anywhere; it moves forwards by moving sideways.

⁵⁰ See Julio Cortazar, *Blow-up and Other Stories* trans. Paul Blackburn (New York: Pantheon, 1967).

Figure 1



→S1→S2→Y4→Y3→£3→£4

T1→T4

W1→W2→L+F1→N1

V1→Z1→Z2

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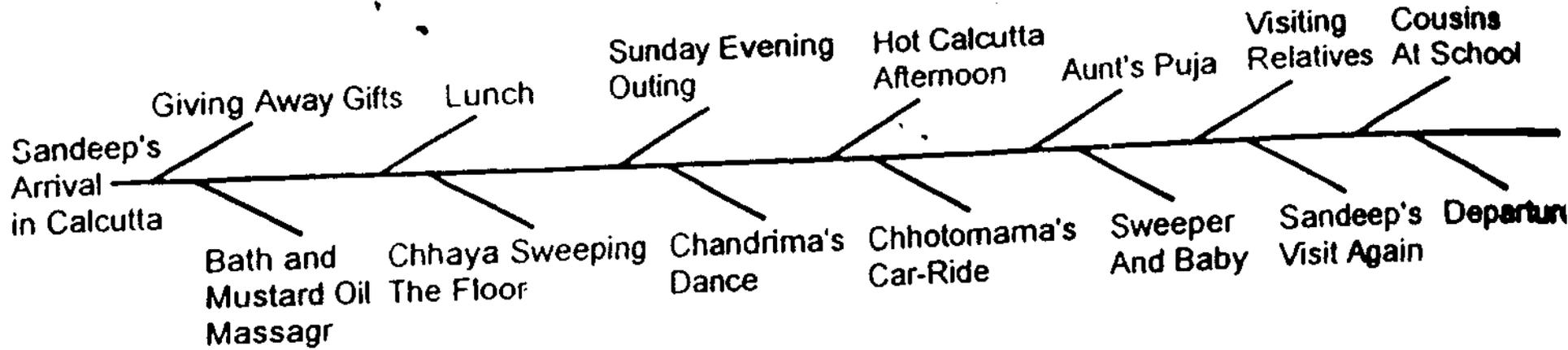
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Figure 2



Perhaps a passage from *A Strange and Sublime Address* would bring out the structural analogy:

The road ended, and it branched off, and on the other side to two narrower ones that led to a great field, a maidan, with a pair of poles at either end which were supposed to be goalposts (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 58).

'I never write anything new...I make up nothing'.⁵¹ 'Chaudhuri's' text – as -intertext deauthorises itself and its author as the supreme authority of the text and its meaning. Although his fiction does away with the 'quotational' architecture that is characteristic of postmodern novels, Chaudhuri sets forth an alternate model that stresses deconstructive repetition, duplication, parallelism, and symmetry. The narrative filters at work reveal the effect of retelling, rewriting, remaking; Chaudhuri's is therefore, a re-visionary aesthetic – like the raag with its 'palimpsest' like texture' (*Afternoon Raag* 107) which 'lives and dies with men, even though they seem to be timeless (*Afternoon Raag* 107), his texts are like rhizomatic buds that live and die and live again. The intertextual structure of his work takes on an intratextual dimension; like the musician who has to re-visit the *sthayi* after the *antara* and the *sanchari*, Chaudhuri re-turns to the familiar metaphors and motifs of his fiction. Pandit Govind Prasad Jaipurwale becomes a qualisign of this 'infinite construction', a kind of exploratory repetition that characterizes the musician's style.⁵²

Although Chaudhuri might not agree (see *Aalap*, in the appendix), David Lodge's five strategies concerning postmodern writing (contradiction, discontinuity, randomness, excess, short circuit) categorises his writing as postmodernist. But at the same time, the amphibrachic nature of his writing is revealed by the Jakobsian paradigm of 'the shifting dominant' at work in his writing. Elements which were originally secondary (Sohanlal,

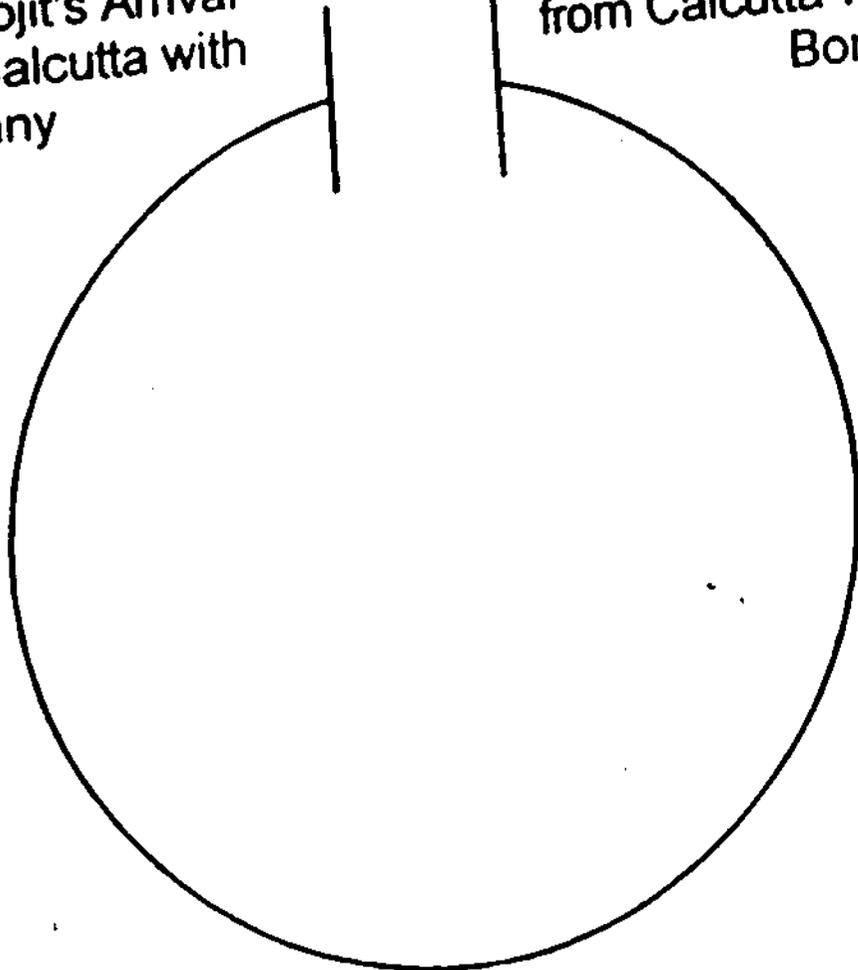
⁵¹ Kathy Acker, *Bodies of Work* (London. New York: Serpent's Tail, 1997), 12.

⁵² Julio Cortazar, *Blow-up and Other Stories* trans. Paul Blackburn. New York: Pantheon, 1967), 185.

Figure 3

Jayojit's Arrival
in Calcutta with
Bonny

Jayojit's Departure
from Calcutta with
Bonny



Mohanlal, for instance in *Afternoon Raag*) become essential and primary. On the other hand, the elements which were originally the dominant ones become subsidiary and optional (Bhaskar's play which started out as the performing trope but becomes an 'absence' in the novel).⁵³

The rhizomatic model of Chaudhuri's fiction leads us to the Todorovian narrative of knowledge; ideally, like Sandip's memories of his childhood, it would never end. Metaexegetically, the quest for knowledge of his characters – significantly it is knowledge through memory – gives birth to the gnoseological narrative which differentiates Chaudhuri's narrative technique from that of his contemporaries. Taking a middle path between the novel of experience and the novel of intuition, his novels fall into Todorov's categorization of the poetic novel where

the primary narrative consists of very little, and that little is continually interrupted by secondary narratives.⁵⁴

The opening in *medias res*, the 'chunks' created as a result of 'tense-switching', the hypotactical (chapter seven is only one page long compared to the eight page long chapter nineteen) structuring of the chapters creates a synecdochic relation between the rhizomic structure of the text and the fractured identity of the postmodern mind; the rhizomatic structure of non-endings and non-beginnings, a relation of 'filling' between an empty structure and a full structure, between the 'simple' plot of (Jayojit, a divorcee's arrival to Calcutta along with his son)

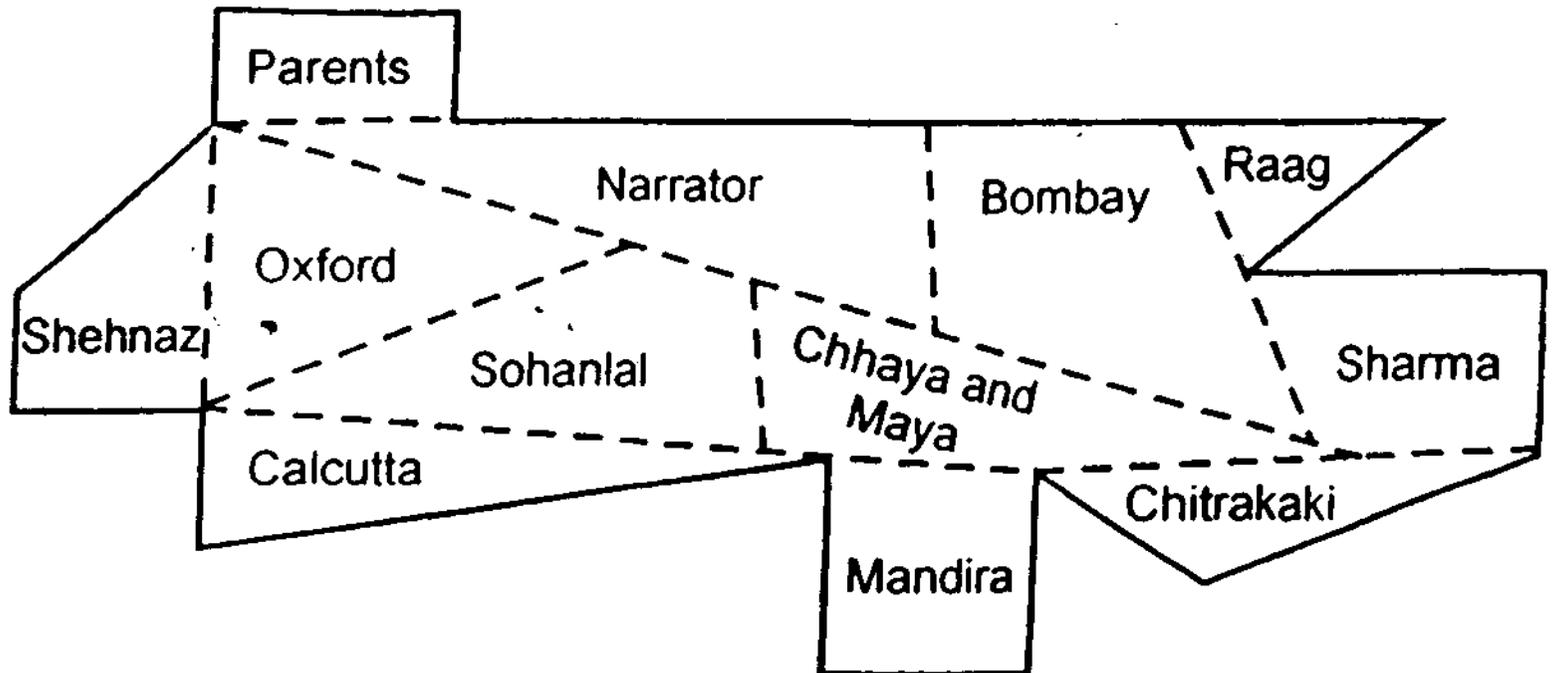
FIGURE 3.

and the two hundred page book with its numerous digressions, repetitions and fillings-in and parodic registers.

⁵³ Roman Jakobson, 'The dominant' in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views* eds. Ladislav Matekja and Krystna Pomorska (Cambridge: Mass. & London: MIT Press, 1971), 108.

⁵⁴ Tzvetan Todorov, *Genres in Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 53.

Figure 4



And yet the story would never be a satisfying one, because the writer, like Sandeep, would be too caught up in jotting down the irrelevances and digressions that make up lives, and the life of a city, rather than a good story – till the reader would shout ‘Come to the point!’ – and there would be no point, ...The ‘real’ story, with its beginning, middle and conclusion, would never be told, because it did not exist (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 57-58).

Chaudhuri’s fictional structures, by going against the Aristotelian dictum of proper beginnings, middles and ends, also rebels against the clichéd narratological model of rising to the climax and then the slope of the denouement, in the process subverting the narrative geometry of Λ to that of the rhizome. Sandeep, Jayojit or the narrator in *Afternoon Raag* lead ‘ordinary’ lives, lives without climaxes or high points. Their *carpediemistic* lives contributes to the rhizomatic structure where a continuous, self-vibrating region of intensities avoids any orientation toward a culmination point or external end. The rhizomatic model also kills the hierarchical tree-root models and, in a simulation of the life of the mind, creates a structure which is all middle, without origin or end. A rhizome, like the boy caught between the ‘backward and forward’ (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 1) movement of the rustling iron gate, has ‘no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*’.⁵⁵ Sandeep’s comings and goings or Jayojit’s arrival and departure should not be simplistically mistaken as beginnings or ends. Those are of no consequence; unlike a ‘structure’ which is defined by a set of points and positions, the rhizome is made only of lines: lines of segmentarity and stratification as its dimensions.

FIGURE 4.

The rhizome, as can be seen, from the diagram, operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots. The rhizome, therefore, becomes a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight.

⁵⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: The Athlone Press, 1996), 25.

Figure 5

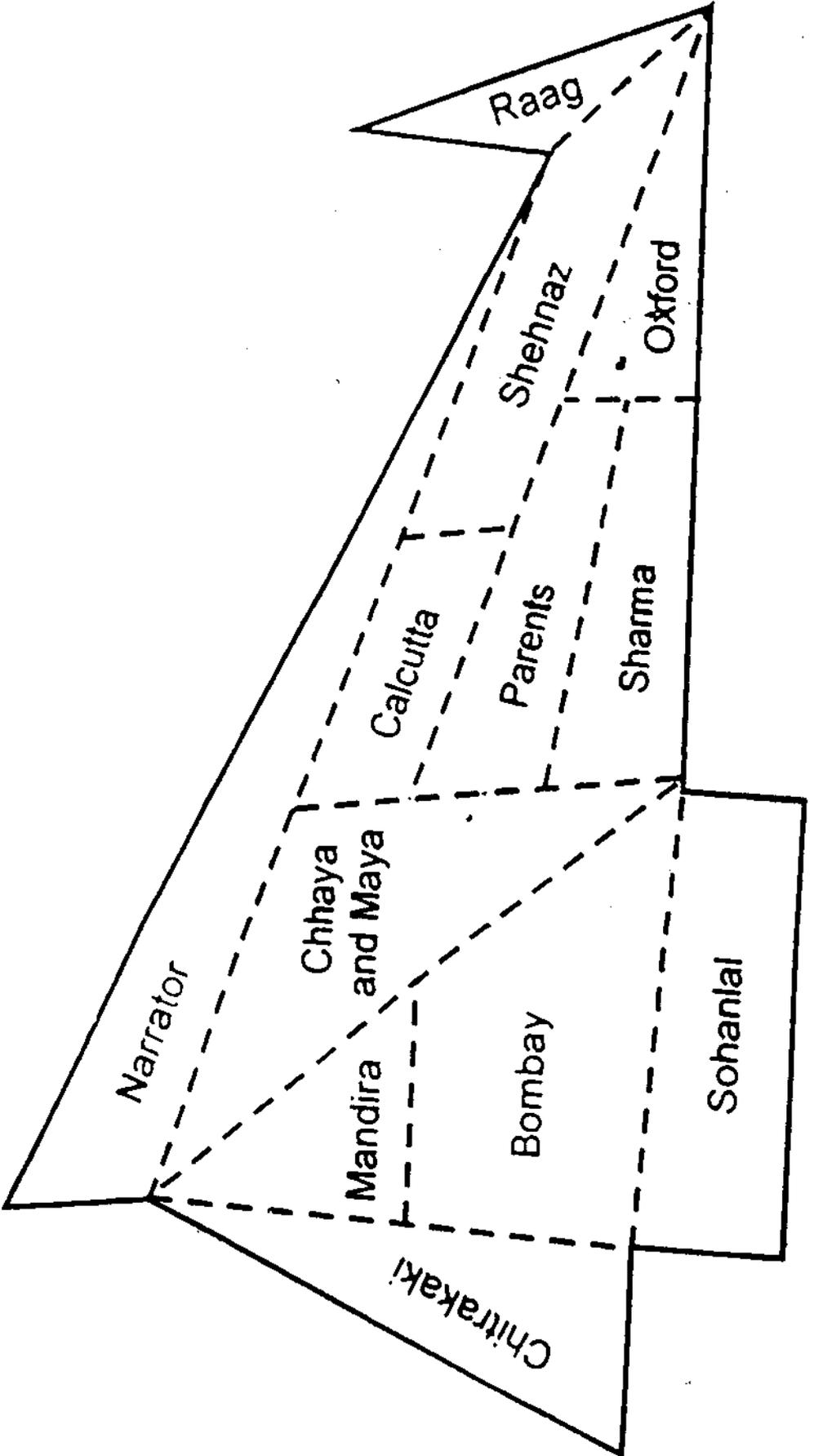


FIGURE 5.

This modifiable structure shows the acentred, nonhierarchical system of Chaudhuri's fiction. Moreover, just as 'any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be',⁵⁶ Chaudhuri's chapter-divisions ceaselessly establish semiotic connections between themselves.

Afternoon Raag was made up in a far more fractured manner where I wrote one chapter now and another later. Chapter four was published and I wrote different chapters at different times and put them together and unlike *A Strange and Sublime Address* did not even bother to create the illusion of one chapter being written after another. I put them together later and yet there is a progression. But I did not bother to create that illusion over there. (see *Aalap*, in the appendix)

Even in a novel like *A New World* which follows, more than all his novels, the somewhat linear trajectory of coming-to going, Chaudhuri, quite significantly, does away with chapter numberings (none of his novels have chapter names); the 'chapter (*A New World*, 108-110) can be 'snuggled' in anywhere, almost like following William Burroughs 'cut-up' method, between most chapters of the book. 'A rhizome maybe broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its olds lines, or on new lines',⁵⁷ like the 'little narratives' of Little's in *Freedom Song*, or the linguistically orphaned and othered narrative that 'begins' with the explanatory note in *A Strange and Sublime Address*, is 'ruptured', continues with the visual discourse on the Bengali alphabets (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 81) is 'segmented' again, but the line of flight meets once again in the narrative on অক্ষর (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 118).

It is through the structure of the rhizome that Chaudhuri succeeds in synthesizing a multiplicity of elements without effacing their heterogeneity or hindering their potential for future rearranging. This orchestration of bricks extracted from different experiences contributes to the open-ended nature of his novels. Through the so-called 'talking cure',⁵⁸

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁸ Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining: Modern to Postmodern* (Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 248.

Chaudhuri-as-another commits himself to 'working through' the fragments of existence until they constitute some kind of narrative configuration. The scattered bits and pieces of experience that take the shape of the rhizome through a narrative re-telling enable Chaudhuri to dissolve the Grand Narrative into fractured discursive narratives. By performing the Ricoeurian narratology of 'the synthesis of the heterogeneous',⁵⁹ Chaudhuri 'tells tales' (his *The Telegraph* Sunday editorial column) through syntagmatic constructions of combinations and additions in a non-hierarchicality of power-structure that writes out the treatise of Chaudhuri's plurivocity of personality.

⁵⁹ Ricoeur quoted in Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining: Modern to Postmodern*, 292.