

### *The Metonymised Body: Exploring the Semiotic of the Body*

‘To semiotize is (first) to segmentize’.<sup>76</sup>

The body in Amit Chaudhuri’s body of work is the Foucaultian ‘inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity) and the volume in perpetual disintegration’.<sup>77</sup> 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 morsellization. With a kind of metonymic fury, the body is captured and contemplated through its beating heart with a hole, leg with a limp, or scattered meshes of hair. I intend to recast Chaudhuri’s fiction in the light of a poetics of fragmentation and (dis)figurement.

Perspective may become anamorphism, ‘real’ may turn fantastic through the strangely ontological power of the descriptive process. To describe a thing is already to be obliged to break into parts before striving in the telling to re-assemble as wholeness. The literary author can tell us ‘little by little’ what the painter’s eye takes in with a whole glance. S/he is faced with a kind of descriptive partialization that makes of the narrated portrait a scene made up of ‘blocks of meaning’, ‘a cubist reading’, as where

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<sup>76</sup> Francis Edeline in Goran Sonesson: [www.artist.lu.se](http://www.artist.lu.se)

<sup>77</sup> Paul Rabinow, ed. *The Foucault Reader* (Pantheon, 1984), 83.

Meaning is in fact a set of cubes, piled up, wedged together, juxtaposed, and yet following, each one, closely on the other's heels'.<sup>78</sup>

Postcolonial critics such as Derek Wright, Elleke Boehmer, Stephen Slemon, and Jean M. Kane have pointed out that the body in pre-independence postcolonial fiction is constructed as a whole, unified body, whereas, the body in post-independence postcolonial fiction is fragmented.<sup>79</sup> This paper shows Chaudhuri performing a Barthean operation on the body in which it 'is torn and ripped apart . . . reassembled into a total body'.<sup>80</sup>

The human face is presented as something to be decoded in the Chaudhurian physiognomy. Through biological mimesis, nature breaks into forms of art, performs parodic acts that deface bodies in disclosing the reproducibility of faces or person. The face is discursive, a telltale transcript of identity –

Sometimes she could see Amala in the boy's straight eyebrows and in his small forehead (*A New World*, 114).

The face becomes a prototypical sign, an exemplary sort of reading matter. The face is an index of genealogy, familiarity of familiarity:

Manik's face was dominated by his father's, not so much by his features as by the vestiges of his personality (*Freedom Song*, 149).

Re-cognition of the face by weighing sameness ('their faces are similar', *Afternoon Raag* 47) and difference ('although both sisters had been different in every way, including appearance', *Freedom Song*, 68) makes the face a somatic correlate of the name. Apart

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<sup>78</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Hill & Wang, 1975), 67-68.

<sup>79</sup> See John S Willis & Hugh Mehan, 'Recognising diversity within a common historical narrative: culture, history and the study of social life' in *Contested Terrain* (eds Phyllis Kahaney & Judith Liu (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 2.

<sup>80</sup> See Barthes, *S/Z*, 67.

from the numismatic quality of the face, the face indexes character, a social norm, a determinate place on the ethical map where every person has a proper place:

His face bore a remarkable similarity to his father's, the same lines around the mouth, the nose curling gently, the same fair complexion, both faces marked by education, a privileged background, and, it was clear, some sort of achievement. The father's was a brahmin's face, rather old-fashioned in a way, . . . . In both faces, especially on the father's, there was a trace of dissatisfaction and naivety, suggesting that neither man could make friends easily (*A New World*, 162).

One does not look at the face, says Emmanuel Levinas, but is granted access to it as an ethical act. That is why mere description and more detail may well define but eventually they disfigure:

. . . part of the face had been paralysed, but it was the part that moved and spoke that looked disfigured (*A New World*,131).

Chaudhuri also challenges the function of the face as a rigid designator, and in moving away from a traditional attack on cosmetics as the vehicle of disguise and deceit, shows how self-construction can be brought about through the chameleon nature of the cosmetic discourse:

Looking critically into the mirror, they appraised their faces and hands with a detached aesthetic interest, as if they were someone else's face and hands waiting to be adorned from simplicity to a complexity that was oddly, unmistakably feminine (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 62).

Like the face, the human hand, in Chaudhuri, also serves as hinge and anchorage point for romantic ('At night their fingers and hands crept towards each other, in the greed for closeness', *Freedom Song*, 184), existential activities (rickshawallas 'clapped their hands in the cold. . . . and their clapping hands were also a part of this other existence, this bottomless being (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 114), and revelation of character ('you

have a kind heart', 'you think too much', 'you give way in arguments' *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 133). Chaudhuri could almost say with Balzac:

A hand, since I have taken that example, a hand is not just a part of the body, it expresses and continues a thought that must be grasped and rendered.<sup>81</sup>

The hand, in Chaudhuri's corporeal grid, in resisting totalization, shows a restless physicality, and a 'lively' circulation of its own:

It (the hand) peered out like a tiny living creature. He held it and seemed to weigh it; then he turned it and gazed at the palm, whose colour was pitched at an elusive glass-thin lightness. She had crumpled it into a flower; he straightened out the unwilling fingers. She was now looking at her hand as if she hadn't seen it before (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 133)

Recognizing a part as a part grows increasingly problematic for a fragment is always a whole for something smaller:

... his mother lay on her back, her feet (one of which had a scar on it ) arranged in the joyous pose of a dancer (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 8);

and coherence, pursued through parts, sometimes leads merely to smaller parts and to a certain inevitable fetishization of the real. The scar on the foot is, certainly, a valorization of the fragment, the focalisation on one piece. Chaudhuri loves to see the foot in its multiplicity ('so many different types of feet, such a multiplicity of sizes', *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 198), and thus shows us the feet in undress ( 'some girls walked barefeet', *Afternoon Raag*, 25; 'barefeet errand boys' *Afternoon Raag*, 79) or the feet that is, and yet not, feet (osteopathic aids and implements 'so that they looked like limbs themselves, on the verge of moving' *Freedom Song*, 168). Partial bodies begin to function as though ontologically complete. There is no bodily unity; rather 'the' body is a conflicting conglomerate of physiology and psychology:

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 17.

He (Chhotomama) would spend five minutes persuading his feet to enter the shoes, or the shoes to swallow his feet (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 15).

Is, Chaudhuri, then, following the Lacanian model of primary narcissism which emphasizes the illusion of bodily unity for the development of a psychological identity?<sup>82</sup> The walking stick that Khuku asks Mini to get for herself, the scar on the mother's foot, Mohon's limp, are all attempts by Chaudhuri at an antimetaphorical activity, an act of incorporation, the affective reaction to a naturalized physiological loss.

Fundamental cultural activities are informed by specific versions of the body, as the Lakshmi footprint evinces. The signs of the footprint on the page reflect how corporeality becomes the critique of culture. The ॐ ॐ are not a mythological deadend; instead, in being read in conjunction with Saraswati's footprints ( 'Her wet footprints printing the floor of the house were as rich with possibility as the first footprint Crusoe found on his island', *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 75) and the rich, rightful evocation of the Friday footprint, the foot/feet become a resistive and transgressive sign that, in its assuming of various metonymies – the goddess's and the subaltern servant's – reveals how the body in Chaudhuri's somatic semiosphere is peculiarly responsive to the relation of the body-text and context.

Chaudhuri's 'dismantling' of the body should not be seen as killing it, for, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, it is 'opening the body to connections that presuppose an entire assemblage'.<sup>83</sup> The attention paid to the hair before and after the 'fall' presses beyond the experiential plane into the hermeneutics of text where critical attention comes to be paid to the textual 'fallibility' attending upon purism and pluralism. The curl, the sought after yet elusive straighter version ('She began to plait her rather unwieldy hair. . . "I wish I had your hair", she said, 'so straight and simple"' *Real Time*, 120), the parlour-promoted new dimensions – His mother would return from the hairdresser with her hair leavened into a full-grown bun, set and lacquered into a marble repose (*Real Time*, 19) - the trans-

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<sup>82</sup> See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* trans. Alan Sheridan ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 1-7.

<sup>83</sup> Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: The Athlone Press, 1996), 160.

locationality of hair ('When the maidservant cleans the room and sweeps the dust to one corner, one may notice there, among other things, a few black strands with delicate, questioning curves that float away with the merest breeze' *Afternoon Raag*, 16) - all point to the pre-re-shaping of meaning beyond its immediate context. It is the critical attention to these various 'forms' of hair (straight, curly, grey, black, dyed) that provoke a correspondence with forms of textuality and the question of catechization (the single strand on the floor), reconstellation ('Urmila had acquired the permanent curls she'd need for a film', *Real Time*, 54 ; 'Urmila Deshpande, her hair long and with no curls in it', *Real Time*, 59), the 'radicle' turns ('It falls in long, black strands, but each strand has a gentle, complicated undulation travelling through it, like a mild electric shock or a thrill, that gives it a life of its own; it is visually analogous to a tremolo on amusical note. It is this tremolo that makes her hair curly and unmanageable and has caused her such lifelong displeasure', *Afternoon Raag*, 16) and hermeneutic stability ('straight black hair' *Afternoon Raag*, 61). One cannot doubt the author's critical inflexion in this hair-text parallelism.

In the body's cross referencing of somatic and semiotic events, Chaudhuri constructs an axiology based on the masculine Bengali physical generality:

... men were slighter and smaller in those days (*Real Time*, 5)

... the Bengali male, dark, not more than five feet and five inches tall, hair carefully parted at the side (*Afternoon Raag*, 118).

Through his obsessive focussing on the semiotic relation between sign and symptom, Chaudhuri reveals his obsession with the diseased body, the body that is no longer ideal, a body in surplus or minus. The narrator's heart, Mini's arthritic foot, the mother's foot run over by a car, Dr. Ghosh's wife's death due to cancer, Bhaskar's backache, Mohon's limpshow that Chaudhuri is not just interested in these pathological registers; he is more concerned with the formation of these trans-form-ations and de-formations wrought by disease. All these people become embodied figures of lack who share, in one form or

another, the debilitating marks, the scar, the limp, et al. Thus Chaudhuri is interested in portraying the body not as it is, but, in an unguarded moment, when it is divorced from the real. This also manifests itself in Chaudhuri's delight in portraying physiognomic inflation constructed by a fantasy-discourse ('she could see them increasing and filling out to their imaginary proportions, to their ideal' *Freedom Song*, 58) juxtaposed against the raw and real physicality of Manohar Aich, 'who had muscles swelling and hardening on every part of his body' (*Freedom Song*, 58); or the phantasmatic body created in the textual process itself ('He splattered talcum powder on himself till his neck and shoulders and chest and nipples and belly were white, and only the navel remained black and bottomless' (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 208), a body that serves the radically new aesthetic concretization of subjectivity per se.

Chaudhuri's literalization of corporeal metaphors constructs a discourse in which the 'mirror stage' is embodied reiteratively:

As a child, I'd often stare  
at my body in the mirror, in the silence, appraising  
weighing, sometimes touch the mirror, feeling the pleasure  
was mine, but that I was being pleased as well;  
that private feeling of separateness  
and connection (*Real Time*, 162)

the mirror forgets time – that is why bodies and not selves appear in mirrors. Conversely, it is the mirror's amnesia that allows us to imagine self-reflection as a timeless event, and allows us to forget the problem of memory's intrusion into the perfect present of vision.

Note the reciprocated contemplation of the image:

For a long

time the mirror stage lasted, and those Roman bodies  
were touched by the hue of my skin, by my sweat  
by sameness and its odd allure (*Real Time*, 163).

This is 'cenesthesia', autoerotic investment. In a conscious awareness of the body, the aesthetic element of cenesthesia is in the nature of an instinctual satisfaction undeniably confused with primary physiological information. It is a variation on 'turning around upon the subject's self'.<sup>84</sup> Apart from the figure of the body in migration ('shy men with moustaches whose frail chests suddenly expanded during these discussions *Freedom Song*, 34, *Freedom Song*, 59, *A New World*, 46), Chaudhuri also evokes the kind of body Merleau Ponty describes as 'the third term. . . always tacitly understood, in the figure-background structure, and every figure stands out against the double horizon of external and bodily space'.<sup>85</sup>

They were more like beds to lie in or chairs to sit safely in (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 83).

The head is attractive for Chaudhuri as long as it is no longer a head. His camera-eye records heads in acrobatic motion, often hands juggling it at odd angles ('and settling a head upon a crooked elbow on the table' *Afternoon Raag*, 61), at other times, at yoga in sleep ('beggars dozed, blind to the heat and shadows, their heads bent to their stomachs *Freedom Song*, 163). The head is usually seen a/part from its body (*Freedom Song*, 170). In Chaudhuri's fetishization of the part, the head as origin becomes an aberration:

rows of famous heads, dead ones and living ones, arranged on the cover like a great floral bouquet, a gift (*Real Time*, 25)

there was a head, yes, which looked many times larger than the body (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 192)

This is the grotesque body described by Bakhtin: the grandiose, the exaggerated, the immeasurable. A victim's head –

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<sup>84</sup> See Jean Starobinski & John A. Gallucci, 'The Body's Moment', *Yale French Studies*. 64, 1983, 273-305.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

A Muslim butcher had been found near the bypass with his skull shattered, blood on his forehead and face (*Freedom Song*, 125)

- registers the marks of political hegemony, and the inscription of 'skull shattered, blood on his forehead and face' (*Freedom Song*, 125) becomes Chaudhuri's attempt to attest and thereby condemn the majority narrative of Hindu superiority. This disfiguring excess of violence remains as symptom of Chaudhuri's uneasiness about figuration, about how the raw material of body takes on socially recognizable contours.

In Chaudhuri's colour chromatological universe of skin and complexion, the discursivity of the body has a kinetic potential-

... or had some of Calcutta's vapour darkened their complexions a shade? (*Afternoon Raag*, 115)

(Manik) grew darker, will he was brown as a roasted nut (*Freedom Song*, 36)<sup>86</sup>

- which is closely allied with transgression for the spectrum of skin sememes are in a constant state of fluidity. However amidst everything emerges Chaudhuri's embodiment of the semiotic of purifying presence: water as purifier and redeemer.

Partialization on the literal level operates with metonymic energy more than that of metaphor, producing (dis)placed parts that are vulnerable to successive changes in their ontological status. The baby's body, in Chaudhuri's fiction, is the Lacanian corps morcele:

It was a baby, its face a fist, its eyes crinkled, and when a hand brushed the tiny strip of cloth that covered it, its naked thighs and buttocks were revealed, and also, in a flash of humorous candour, the fact that its sex was female (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 40).

It is also the Lacanian homelette (note the use of 'plasticene') –

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<sup>86</sup> I have italicised these verbs to show this kinetic potential.

Mamima now kneaded abhi's and Babla's bodies with mustard oil. She twisted them, took them apart, put them together; they surrendered to her as plasticene surrenders its infinite forms to a child's fingers. When she rubbed an arm or leg, it appeared to detach itself from the body, she rubbed an arm or leg, it appeared to detach itself from the body, with a wonderful absence of pain, and come into her skilful hands, a live, grotesque appendage. She would oil it till shone, and then fix it, with a grim, satisfied smile, where it belonged (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 4)

-the unfinished protean body, coming into life:

with their frantic miniature limbs and their brown, shining bodies, they look like little koi fish caught from the Hoogly river, struggling into life (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 5).

In the development of a new axiology of movement, the baby's body also reveals several fragmented psyches, evidenced in the unconnectedness of parts:

A child was practicing how to walk – each time it took a careful, tentative step forward, a step taken with huge, melodramatic conviction, its other leg forgot it was a leg, and the child, bewildered by its own body, collapsed in a heap (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 20).

The baby's body is also one of the Freudian 'Fort!', the throwing out, the dismemberment revealing itself in

... she had just urinated on her father's shirt (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 68)  
spittle dribbled from the side of her mouth. Great cobwebs of saliva hung from her lips.  
This was Annapurna, a moist, unctionous thing (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 69).

In Chaudhuri's optic universe, the metaphors of the eye is deeply embedded in metonymic visuality and its attendant grammar of looking. Visuality is the ground upon which vision is mapped. If looking is a culturally determined activity, the eyes in Jamini Roy's paintings, 'the ideal figures with over-large eyes that did not see' (*Real Time*, 109) or Durga's 'two large eyes' (*A New World*, 156) become an emblematic and an expressionistic viewing experience. Lenin's eyes (*Freedom Song*, 46) and Vivekananda's

eyes ('What eyes Vivekananda had – eyes of deep unwavering calm which remained untroubled by the insistent hooting of the state transport buses going past', *Freedom Song*, 49), with their unique arrestations of the gaze, are Chaudhuri's tropes to show how culture (here, Calcuttan) obtains, creates, and polices reflective images of itself.

In Chaudhuri's republic of visuality, the gaze is founded in knowledge; Babla's gaze-

Babla, meanwhile, sat listening to the adults talking; his eyes darted from one face to the other, then back again, as if he were following a game of tennis, as if he could see questions and answers, like white balls being tossed from one end of the court to another (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 45)

- is the knowing eye that teases out allusions and delights in the play of wit. Chhotomama's eyes which 'would widen to ping-pong balls with something like love' (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 152) is an example of a sentimental look in which the eye moves in and around the three-dimensional space, registering incident and contrast, generating expectation, and delighting in surprise. The gaze of Jayojit's mother, 'trying to make the imaginative leap, to see them through the eyes of the people Jayojit would give them to' (*A New World*, 166), is the screen onto which the eye projects its image of fantasy, an othered vision. In Chaudhuri, the gaze also lends itself to the spectrum becoming spectacle, and spectacle almost spectator:

She (Mita Reddy) smiled; and waved – at whom, no one, among the millions watching, knew (*Real Time*, 51).

Just as description is for the writer the pool of partial signifiers from which a larger picture may be constructed, so vision, for the protagonist is the pool of objects. In this connection, the one-eyed gaze (the cook 'winking at it with one eye closed' *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 199), the faulty gaze ('even the long-distance lens couldn't conceal the tiredness beneath her eyes' *Real Time*, 52), the squinty gaze ('reading everything at such angles had given her eye a squint, and her an incongruous lost and searching look', *Freedom Song*, 34), the bi-focalised cross-eyed gaze ('the 'cross-eyed girl, the squint in

her eye making her look just a little deranged. . . . one eye was looking at him, and the other one was looking at the rest of the world' *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 46-47), the surplus eye ('the only thing faintly resplendent was the third eye, which whenever it opened, shone with more light than the moon', *Real Time*, 118) are all examples of Chaudhuri's signs through which he constructs a different psychographics.

In that great trope of reflection, the dark glasses of Tendulkar –

his (Tendulkar's) glasses so dark they bore no reflection. When he spoke, you had to look at his mouth because of the challenge his dark glasses threw you (*Real Time*, 50)

- the gaze is re-vis(ual)ised with the addition of more viewing frames. Here the gaze is like a beam from a lighthouse – only instead of light travelling outwards, appearances travel in: everything converges on these dark glasses as to the vanishing point of infinity. The visible world reflected on the glasses and the in-visible on the Tendulkar-god's mouth is arranged for the spectator as the universe was once thought to be arranged for God. According to the convention of perspective, there is no visual reciprocity. There is no need for Tendulkar-god to situate himself in relation to others: he is himself the situation.

In these tales of predominantly first-person narrators, the narrator's act of looking further contributes to the body's constitution of dismemberment. Chaudhuri's fascination with the scopic, however, also takes him beyond associations with vision and cognition; the aesthetics of the eye, by and of itself, becomes a voyeur's enterprise. Bhaskar's 'large black long-lashed eyes' (*Freedom Song*, 49) ('his eyes were so large and dark that they seemed to be outlined with kohl', *Freedom Song*, 142) or eyes with kaajal around it are, quite simply, Chaudhuri's attempts at the politics of prettifying. The eye also becomes a transparent text and the haze of the gaze produces an indexical semiotics where the 'eye' constructs a textual web of the reflective 'I':

His eyes were brown-grey, as if they held a little of the twilight of another town in them (*A New World*, 55).

... behind those kohl-dark eyes, he could only see the paradisial land of Kashmir (*A New World*, 141).

‘What determines me most profoundly in the visible’, Lacan writes, ‘is the gaze that is outside. It is through the gaze that I enter into the light, and from the gaze that I receive its effects’.<sup>87</sup> (In the visual space of Chaudhuri’s fiction, thoughts do not swarm, they see : the gaze of refusal to gaze (Charmayne’s refusal ‘to look directly at them’, *Real Time*, 16 or ‘the English do not consider it polite to look at each other’, *Afternoon Raag*, 14), or the democratic gaze (‘Father Kurien. . . looked down apocalyptically upon the heads of the boys and girls’, *Real Time*, 22), or the lack-of-spectacles gaze (‘for without them, she suffered a temporary darkening of vision’, *Freedom Song*, 165) are products of Chaudhuri’s scopophilia which allows him to capture visible and in-visible contours and create them anew.

The body’s ability to move, cover up, reveal itself, and even ‘fracture’, in other words, dance’s ideological coding, is one way of Chaudhuri’s invocation of the body to figure the epistemological threat of rhetoric. Dance, in *Real Time*, becomes an expression of individuality (anything goes, you can do anything,) –

‘There are no steps, believe me’, he said. ‘You just have to move, and enjoy yourself’ (*Real Time*, 16)

- but also an equaliser, a physical and social force which erodes hierarchies even as it foregrounds the specificity of Khusroo and Gautam (*Real Time*, 18). In contradistinction to other aristocratic dances which require ordering or prescribed movements, Khusroo and Gautam’s dance accorded independence, involved whirling and improvised movement for, in their dance, individual autonomy finds an appropriate corporeal expression.

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<sup>87</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* trans. Alan Sheridan ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 54.

There are bodies in Chaudhuri's grammatology of dance that remain in excess even beyond the partializing forces of language. What Chaudhuri shows us is Khusroo's and Gautam's utterly tangible body, its appearance prepared through the fragments of representation:

As if he were being rocked from side to side, and backward and forward, in a train compartment, Khusroo's hips and torso shook, as, more frugally, did his legs . . . . Melody was replaced by a menacing curl of the lips. All the time, Khusroo seemed to lean forward quickly and spectatorially, then immediately retreat backward with a mildly alarmed air ; meanwhile, his arms, quite irrelevantly and encouragingly keeping time, appeared to treat these two ostensibly unconnected movements as part of a single motion, accompanying the with magical and peremptory snaps of the fingers (*Real Time*, 18).

It is this body that extends beyond itself and out of its centre of gravity to almost break apart. The living body of self-presentation and desire is confronted with fragmentation. It is the price for seeing and being seen:

He (Gautam) could not see himself, much as he would have liked to, wantonly positioning himself a few inches away from a girl, and then, with aplomb, shivering and shaking ecstatically before her. Perhaps he would not mind if she did not look at him, but, contradictorily, perhaps he would mind (*Real Time*, 17).

Dance, in Chaudhuri, is also a form of spatial inscription and thus a productive way of illustrating the metamorphic body. The body, in Chandrima's and Sohanlal's dance, is an unstable signifier rather than a single, independent and discrete entity:

When Sohanlal became Radha, his face would be turned away a little, in shyness and also in hurt at Krishna's transgressions, one eyebrow raised but the eyes averted. But when he was Krishna, he was the child Krishna, his lips smeared with curds and butter, or dancing upon the serpent's head, or swaying very lightly to his own music (*Afternoon Raag*, 106) (*italics mine*).

This ability to take on new forms and dissolve into another in a moment is an example of Chaudhuri's body-in-process, a process which usually requires radical metamorphosis:

She (Chandrima) would embroider funny gestures with her small hands, so that they looked now like an absurd bird, and now like a doe's head, and now like barely visible wings. All the time, she would be singing to herself and swaying from side to side, beating a rhythm on the floor with her foot, and never managing to do it in perfect measure (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 20).

Chandrima's monodrama expresses the split subjectivity of one character; hence the transformations of the performing body are relatively subtle. Both Chandrima and Sohanlal 'split' into a number of subjects: Radha, Krishna, the child Krishna or, bird, doe's head, visible wings.

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 is 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 culture. This disjunction between the culture's dominant 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. 'Metamorphosis, then, is the medium of access to the phantasmatic body, and, more specifically: metamorphosis experienced as the movement of desire or anxiety'.<sup>88</sup> This portrayal of Suparnekha (*Real Time*, 114) are 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

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<sup>88</sup> See Veronica Kelly & Dorothea E. Von Mucke, *Body and Text in the Eighteenth Century* (Stanford University Press, 1994), 182.

blanket behind him, a dark four foot ten inch demon', *Freedom Song*, 3), 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.

Is Chaudhuri's narrative, then, a fantastic one? Yes, and No.

Are the fragments of the human body the displaced markers of the narrator's consciousness? Yes, and No.

The fragmented body in his texts can be said to be the representative of his fascination with all that is fragmentary and incomplete, in contradistinction to the structured and structuring unities of the realist novel. Just as the novel is fraught with parts that try to achieve an illusory unity, the human body is also seen to be a careful patchwork, a different vision of wholeness. By portraying the Lacanian 'bodies in pieces', Chaudhuri's dynamics of fragmentation becomes a gesture toward a differently envisioned wholeness, a re-assembled body, and his writing becomes an embodied discourse of Deleuze and Guattari's words , 'The human body is a segmentary animal'.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*. (London: The Athlone Press, 1996), 208.