Sumana Roy : Since the reader's primary acquaintance with your work is through fiction, let me begin with your theory of fiction. In *A Strange and Sublime Address* , you say – 'The real story, with its beginning, middle and conclusion would never be told because it did not exist'. Are you not then speaking of the text as rhizome? How much of this theory would you say applies to your fiction?

Amit Chaudhuri : Let me try and answer this as best as I can. Each of the novels evolved in a different way . I'll talk about the nitty-gritty of the composition first. Then I'll talk about theories of storytelling.

What happened is that I wrote much of *A Strange and Sublime Address* in Bombay. My father had retired ; we'd moved to the suburbs of Bombay ; St. Cyril Road is the name of the place we had moved to.I began to write the novel over there. And then I went to Oxford , continued writing it and came back for my first summer vacation with the intention of completing it. By that time , one of the chapters – what turned out to be Chapter Seven – had been published in the *London Review of Books* and quite a few people- publishers and agents- had shown interest in the book. I came back therefore with the intention of finishing the novel. When I had finished it and began to revise it , I saw that much of what I had written, the first half or even the first two-thirds of the novel wouldn't do ; I'd have to rewrite it. And then I got hepatitis and was out of action for a month and half. I was despairing whether I could turn it into a novel. When I began to edit the work, I found that the actual work- as it finally stands – began to emerge. So it was partly a process of writing, rewriting and writing new things , and arranging along with cutting out things as well. When I was editing it I realised that I did not need to have clear links between one thing and another. When I wrote the first draft , the links were much clearer ; when I looked at it again, I saw that somehow it didn't seem right. Yet I was bothered by the fact how I could take out these links without making it seem obviously fractured. But as I began to take them out and keep the things that I liked I

realised that it works better that way. And secondly there is an illusion of the narrative which works much better.

At that time , I also happened to read how William Golding's first novel *The Lord of Flies* had been composed and there was an article about the editor – I can't recollect his name – in the *TLS* and how he had advised Golding to take out the explanatory opening sequence to begin with the boy arriving at the island. And I thought , oh, so this can be done. I started by doing the same. I took out the explanatory part about the life in Bombay and started with the arrival of the boy in Calcutta.

Many years later, a young American student, (in one of the few instances I have taught creative writing) found it very interesting that the narrative moved very well in spite of the fact that there was no paragraph which necessarily needed to come after another paragraph. There was no necessary causal link between a paragraph and another. And I congratulated him for having spotted that out. With *Afternoon Raag* it is easier to spot. So in that sense, I would say that I did not begin with the idea of the linear narrative or the idea of progression or developing something along the lines of a (conventional) novel.

I'm also a person who is not deeply interested in what is conventionally called a story. I'm actually interested in stories but I do not necessarily understand what other people understand by stories- lots of characters, things happening. Somehow those things bore me very much. And things which usually bore other people do not necessarily bore me. I think the movement between worlds, between cultures is one thing that interests me. For instance, Sandeep is listening to his uncle singing inside the bath and as he listens he asks him what 'godhuli' means. The picture comes into Sandeep's head and he returns to the bath again. This is the movement between one world and another within the same space and that is the kind of movement which for me substitutes for what the other novelists call narrative. I'm more interested in that kind of movement between two different worlds , this inner and outer , sometimes two incompatible cultural worlds which can be signified by the use of sajana tree and Colgate toothpaste in the same sentence. So that is what I find has the movement of narrative.

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.

SR : But you couldn't have had Mandira leaving at the beginning.

AC : Yes, of course. There is a progression. I don't know whether that answers your question.

SR : Would you say, then, that you are writing postmodernist fiction or are following postmodern methods of narratology?

AC : As I understand postmodernism, I feel very removed from it in some ways. For me, the difference between myself and a postmodernist is, in spite of the disregard for linear narratives , that there is a kind of textuality and self-reflexivity about postmodernism, which as I understand it, lends a very political touch to the very apolitical world we live in. In postmodernism, the artist's connection to the real is always under question, always reminded of textuality very consciously by the writer himself. The writer himself is a construction or the text itself is a construct. For me the ability of writing is to renovate our perception of the physical world , of the world we live in – something which I've inherited from writers gone by. For me, temperamentally, that is a very important thing. Modernism has that. Modernism, in spite of its superficial similarities with postmodernism- fractured texts, polyphony of voices – has a great fascination for the real, for the physical world outside. And you feel it in Joyce in the whole notion of epiphany and the renovation of the conception of the ordinary ,in his first record of the epiphany, in clothes drying on a clothesline somewhere in Dublin. And this relocation of an almost religious feeling about the middleclass of Dublin. I feel temperamentally more close to that. In postmodern texts, I don't find that dimension of belief in the poetic power of language. I don't find it.

SR: The idea of dispersed meditations is very postmodern.

AC : But isn't it there in modernism as well? Modern poetry?

In postmodernism, the idea of fullness and the idea of self-reflexivity and the constructedness of language exist in mutually exclusive compartments, so that if you are a true postmodern, you deny the idea of fullness. You throw it out of the window. For me these ideas do not exist in mutually exclusive domains. And nor do I think in Indian culture – if I can use such a broad word- the idea of textuality of a text and the emotional fullness which a text can evoke can exist in a seemingly, according to the postmodernists, incompatible space. A. K. Ramanujan talks about a scene from the *Ramayana* where Ram does something and Sita tells him , 'Don't you know you can't do that ? Haven't you read the previous *Ramayanas*?' We can appreciate this comic self-reflexive moment or partake of the emotional fullness of what the *Ramayana* means. In postmodernism you can't do that. Fullness is, to use a word from the existential philosophers- 'bad faith'. For me , this incompatible space does not need to exist where fullness becomes sort of politically identified with suspect rightwing ideas of history. And self-reflexivity and dispersal becomes reflective of the polyphonic meaning in this globalised world under capitalism. I don't feel that way myself.

Secondly, the idea that postmodernism gives up, the idea that language has the power to renovate perception which is what poetry is all about is difficult for me to accept. Maybe that is why poetry today has become such a secondary or tertiary form . In giving that up, one is giving not only a deeply religious but also a deeply political idea that language can – as Rilke says, you must change your life- change the way you look at something.

Modernism, for me , is important. It has this great feeling for words and things. For me also, words and things are important. Poststructuralism does not exist for me in that space in which aesthetics and emotion don't play a part. I have talked too much about this and gone a great length but I was just trying to tell you why I don't identify myself with postmodernism.

SR: Your prose , too, appropriates - in too many instances to neglect- a model of a text. 'Silence', 'play', 'presence', 'absence', 'hidden', 'meaning', 'decentred', 'margins' seem

to be recurring words. Do you then consciously model your writing on a specific methodology of reading?

AC : No. You absorb some words from theory; maybe what you have read on theory and then use them for your own ends but obviously no writer works that way. You unconsciously sometimes subvert the word and then it is up to the reader to unearth connections and to find out ways in which he feels they might have been played out. But I think no writer writes in a void and you are always reacting to things, not only the world you are writing about but reacting to other forms of writing which you want to go against. One is not very conscious of doing these things but one of the things I did not want to write, when I began writing my first novel, was a novel in which the individual was the centre of the novel. I wanted the novel to be about a family, or even a community or even a state or about what it means to be inside and outside , about a house and its relationship to the outside rather than being about the inner life of a person.
Another thing is, when I was quite young , in the seventies, when I was about seventeen or eighteen years old , then in the intellectual circles in Bombay, what you had were the leftovers of existential thought and although I did not understand at that time what it meant , I sensed a great individualism over there and I wanted to avoid that. At one point I realised that the individual was not of primary interest and therefore the novel of character and character development was not of primary interest for me. What I was interested in was certain things juxtaposed against each other, whether in groups, cultural worlds signified by words.

SR : True, all your novels have a great sense of community. But in *Afternoon Raag*, the narrator's life is important.

AC : In *Afternoon Raag*, because it is narrated in the first person. With *A Strange and Sublime Address* , people asked me, 'Have you written an autobiographical novel?' I was at pains to say that it was not about myself and about my life or the genre of autobiography, that I was born , I grew up and this was my inner life. I was not interested in that. Even in *Afternoon Raag*, I was not primarily interested in the inner life of the

narrator as I was in, say, the comings and goings of different worlds within one world. I am not talking about India and England but the different worlds; that the young man in Oxford is waiting to cross the street and go and check his mail. It starts off with this lane in Oxford, ends up in the mail room and then it goes to the memory of the mother who has Isabgol because of her constipation. So Isabgol on the one hand and some other word signifying Oxford on the other hand is the journey I'm talking about. It is this coming together of different realities that interests me.

SR: My next question follows from the previous one. It is about the Bengali family which you call 'a tangled web, an echoing cave, of names and appellations, too complicated to explain individually'. 'Their meaning ', you say, 'is brought out in context' (*A Strange and Sublime Address*). Did you have the language system in mind to bring out an analogical relationship?

AC : No, I didn't. I had another thing in mind. It is sort of clever of you to point that out. Its a nice way of looking at it. I put it in and took it out because I thought it would be overloading it . I had in mind music where every note has its place, and there are octaves and semisharps and flats and I thought that this world of relatives names in Bengali is much like the system of music and music is a language. So you could say that I was aware of some system of language. But not in any theoretical sense. I liked your analogy but it wasn't conscious.

SR: Since the question of language has come up, I would be interested to know about the use of Bengali in your fiction. You call Sandeep a 'language orphan' but at the same time you present Bangla graphically; you also make abundant use of Bangla songs, Tagore, Nazrul, etc . How important is Bangla in your fiction?

AC : Bangla was for me a graphic experience.

SR : Yes, that's pretty evident in the wonderful graphic representation of the Bangla alphabet in *A Strange and Sublime Address*.

AC : I did that with the Bengali alphabet but I took care to make it comic. I didn't want to make it serious. I didn't want to make it another postcolonial statement. I was true to that child, to myself as a child that the Bengali alphabet had a kind of resonance for me just as the mandolin had for Proust. The Bengali alphabet was a material thing to me and in "Beyond Translation", I have written about that as well. I was fascinated by the Bengali books which my cousins used to read and which I could not read. That whole world of rakhshos, khokhos , raja, saatsamudra , etc. I felt very deprived to be cut off from that amazing world. Thakumar jhuli, all those illustrations in blue ink, and those covers, I was fascinated by them. So Bengali at first was a very visual experience for me besides , of course, the oral one. It resonated for me in many ways.

SR: How difficult is it to narrate a Bengali /Indian experience in a foreign tongue? In *A Strange and Sublime Address* you call the Bangla 'jatee' 'a sharp and dangerous implement', for example.

AC : I liked the phrase 'sharp and dangerous implement'. I did not translate it. I translate things when I find words in English which to me are aesthetically pleasing. They may be witty or they might sound nice to my ear. The ear is, for me, a very important guide. 'A sharp and dangerous implement' sounded good to me. When I think that the sound of the Bengali word is better, then I keep it there. In *Freedom Song* there are many Bengali words. But it is quite arbitrary. It depends on what I feel.

SR: For example, how would you translate a word like 'luchi'?

AC : But I don't. I use 'luchi' all the time. It depends on what my ear is telling me. If the translation leads to creativity, then I welcome it. In *A Strange and Sublime Address*, for example, I kept the explanatory note there because creatively I was quite pleased with it. I thought it formed a part of the fiction. If it was a dry explanatory note, I wouldn't have kept it there. But I think that the problem of translation has led me to write something which I am happy with as a piece of writing.

SR: How much, then, do you think are your novels 'Bangla', in the sense of a Bangla sensibility? You have been quoted as saying that you feel an elective affinity with Bibhuti Bhusan Bandopadhay.

AC : There are times when you are trying to invoke the intimate space which a word evokes ; there are times when you are trying to be ironical and show distance . To Sandeep, 'jatee' is an exotic instrument. Sandeep has never seen jatees before. So to him it is a rather strange thing. I remember as a child when I came to Calcutta, I used to see my aunt do this with this thing and I used to think, what a weird array of objects because I came from a completely different background. So for me it was a 'sharp and dangerous implement'. The word 'jatee' had no resonance for me at all. People don't think that in India itself there are so many different experiences and this is what things like *A Strange and Sublime Address* explored. It is about different Indias , what a boy coming from Bombay to a house in Calcutta and the kinds of shifts in signification that take place over there which gave rise to the particular poetry of his imagination has to do with his feeling of difference. West is a very long way away and I don't know where the west is. I think this is a very problematic thing, this talking about India and the West because in India , as compared to the West or some other country , we are in a very fluid position all the time. We don't know where in us the West begins and the Indian starts. We don't know where they become interchangeable terms, where in the word 'Bengali', the West or colonial begins and the Indian or native starts. Its very difficult. These words break down when you put them under scrutiny. There are no authentic things which you can posit against another and say, I don't believe in the Nehruvian model that here is a lab, here is a beaker and we put the West and East in and brew them together. Its far more problematic than that. We are very lucky to be in that situation where we not only belong doubly but are being reinvented all the time. And yet we feel authenticity. Somehow, in all this hybridity and reflexivity , there is still the feeling of fullness, of being what we are. So things are not incompatible. But I don't believe in this divide. Western audience is a phrase put to the Indian writer in English again and again . I think that it is a meaningless phrase, a trivial and lazy question with a slight political edge to it. And for a writer to

protest that he doesn't write with an audience in mind is not enough. The whole question of audience is a very interesting and complicated one and needs to be looked at more rigorously if we are to think about which audience is a writer writing for. With modernism comes a breach between writer and audience. In *The Intellectual and the Masses* , John Carey writes about the contempt the modern author feels for the audience. Is James Joyce writing for Leopold Bloom? U.R. Anantamurthy, in a story which is in the *Picador Anthology*, writes about a Marxist narrator obviously modeled on someone like himself who goes back to his village. Meets someone from his childhood, a village buffoon who he condemns and yet strangely feels some axis of spiritual rootedness in him which the Marxist narrator lacks. Here is an example of the Indian coming face to face with his exotic, with his other. It is not a confrontation between the West and the East. This is a very important constituent of the Indian consciousness. The exotic is not something of the West; it is very much an important and inalienable part of the Indian consciousness itself. *Aranyer Din Ratri*, the film, is about the confrontation between the bourgeoisie and the Indian exotic. Anantamurthy's writing raises the question, is he writing for the buffoon? Obviously not . But he is writing about him. Does that India constitute his audience? No. Is Bibhuti Bhusan writing for the village that he is writing about? It is not a question of the marketplace; it is a question of the whole modernist novel in which we are dealing with the exotic and the other as an inalienable part of the consciousness which is different from us and yet is strangely spiritually sustaining to us. And therefore we cannot always write for our audience because the audience is other and yet is spiritually sustaining to us. So let us think about this thing far more rigorously than we have.

SR: How conscious are you while naming your characters? Saraswati the goddess and Nimai the saint are servants in your fiction. Does this become noema subalternism, if I am allowed to coin such a term?

AC : Fairly . Fairly conscious.
I like your questions for their interpretative qualities. You already provide answers in them. Certainly I did not mean anything very consciously. It might have been there. I

cannot remember now. Nimai, the janitor or sweeper...I talk about Nimai the saint as well. As an artist I juxtapose creatively what is exciting to me. I named Saraswati because she was modeled on a maidservant called Lakshmi. I wanted her to be called after a goddess but I didn't want her to obviously have the name of the real maidservant. In other texts, I have preserved real names.

SR: Nando?

AC : No, I won't tell you which ones. But some of the names are real names and I used them when I thought there could be no better names than these to indicate what I wanted to.

SR: Chhaya and Maya?

AC : Yes, those are real names. Therefore, again, in spite of all this talk about postmodernism, dispersal and other, we find that names, for instance, have the ability of belonging to a person in a way that postmodernism would deny. As a writer, one begins with the assumption that I can't use this name because that name could not have been any other person. So names are fairly important although I don't know how the name Sandeep came up. It doesn't seem to me particularly the best name for that person. I'm happy with names like Nimai and Saraswati.

SR: Gandhi, Subhas, Nehru, Vivekananda too are recurring figures . Any special reasons behind this?

AC : As a child I used to come to Calcutta and I used to find that these names , not Gandhi, but Subhas, Vidyasagar, Vivekananda of the Bengal Renaissance and different Bengal movements formed a part of the imaginary world of my cousins. They saw them as some sort of supermen. That whole world is not very far from the fantasy world in which Phantom and Tarzan existed. Subhas Bose, Rabindranath were characters. We used to play sometimes where we would be Vivekananda or Subhas Bose and there is

such a scene in *A Strange and Sublime Address*. Gandhi , I soon realised did not belong to this group. Growing up in Bombay, I went to school where I was taught that he was the Father of the Nation . Coming here to my cousin's place, I would find that even in the grown up world, he had a far more ambivalent standing. So it was this fantastic world of the children in which these real histories had become transposed into a kind of fantasy narrative.

SR: The Hindu sensibility – without its present day fanatic religious bigotry, of course - pervades your fiction. Even the Muslim Rehman claims to believe in Lakshmi. In this context, how significant is the Lakshmi footprint or the clove patterns in sandalwood paste on the bride's face?

AC : Those events – I haven't invented anything. I have transcribed what actually happened more or less in Lakshmi Purnima night. The invention is only by a language to make it seem new. It was one of those first times I was seeing Lakshmi Puja in Calcutta. We lived in Bombay. I had come along with my mother to Calcutta. I lived in England at that time and just happened to be there with her and I saw her making these footprints.

SR: What did they signify for you?

AC : I don't know. I just thought they were amazing. One foot was placed in front of another and it reminded me of the way the bride walked at the time of the wedding.

SR: They always lead inward , never outward.

AC : Yes, they never lead outward. The whole sense of reality of fullness, again, of these texts which we in India call epics, the awareness of textuality of things ; the footprint created by your mother is just a mark but there maybe fullness of these fictions. I was fascinated.
And what Rahman came and said - yes, I think Rahman was also his real name , a name which could not be substituted by another name- that 'no, no, I'm a great believer in

Lakshmi' and as he was saying that it struck me. There are times, for me, when the idea of a story comes to me when the difference between a text and reality is blurred. This was one of those moments when I thought that I was listening to something which could be a speech in a play. It was as good as anything composed. I thought that I only had to write the play which already exists.

So in that sense again, I am not an autobiographical writer. I copy down texts which already exists. For me sometimes reality is the text; it has a textuality about it . So these things have happened.

SR: But then patterns seem to appeal to you. For example, the clove patterns on the bride's face.

AC : I saw someone doing it to my wife actually when we were to get married and it struck me and got into my novels. Patterns, the whole ephemerality of a whole section of our art is what I find very interesting. People take so much care to build things which don't last. And everything – you, I the floor- serves as a canvas and manuscript for marks to be erased out and something to be reinscribed again. And the whole idea of preservation , of history, of the book being bound, preserved goes in an opposite direction from this idea of art which enters life and life is you and I becoming manuscripts as it were. This art appears and it is beautiful and much laboured upon and much satisfaction is derived from it . and then quite without any feeling, it is erased. It is true of our music as well, which before recordings came about, there was no way of knowing how some compositions came about, who made them, how someone sang because the whole idea of genius allied to composition is alien to our culture. The raag has not been created by any one person ; it is an inheritance. That I find fascinating.

SR: Your fiction is a treasure house for semioticians. Are you a conscious creator of a sign-rich polysemic text?

AC : No, I'm not. But the way in which life in India is a kind of bazaar of these signs which are always being replaced by other signs and the way in which the manuscript is

out there and when I write sometimes from real life, it means that the text is out there and I just write it down . In that sense, I am but I am not doing it consciously. My temperament moves towards that. Its not happening by chance. If you become very conscious, then the story will die on you.

The Lakshmi footprints – as I drew them – were an alien on that page. They did not belong there. That was part of the attraction for me : the shock of seeing those footprints on a page which contained printed English words. That interested me. The same thing interested me about the word অলক্ষ্মী . I was interested in these juxtapositions but nothing was done with a programme in mind. The writer is doing complicated and complex things. Writing is a very coded way of dealing with complexity. It is a form of dreaming as well. If it becomes conscious, then the dream doesn't remain. It is for others to talk about it ; but if I begin to do it, if the reader begins to do it, he wakes up. One is doing various things in a way in which the subconscious is in commerce with the conscious.

SR: What about the ephemerality of your covers?

AC : I don't decide on the covers.

SR: You have no say on the choice of covers then.

AC : No, I do at times.

SR: Does that explain the temporality of art depicted on the covers: the mehendi-painted hand, the water droplets on glass, graffiti or a painting ?

AC : For Freedom Song, the only thing I liked about the painting was the wall. At that time they did not have any Bengali graffiti on it. And I asked them to put it in. What I asked them was to take out the two figures on the wall. They didn't do that. I'm very interested in graffiti and I write about that in *Freedom Song* as well.

SR: You seem to be fascinated with attire and the way it drapes the human form, especially the sari.

AC: Its again got to do with the same thing that is in our culture - and it is true of all cultures – where things become objects of utility but are at the same time semiconsciously artistic objects. Many sarees, kathas Baluchuri sarees, all these have texts in them.

SR: Dried clothes also interest you.

AC : Yes, they do. At this time I hadn't read about Joyce and the clothes drying but what I had seen was a series of photographs by Cartier-Bresson which are not sufficiently well known. A sequence of photographs of women – Rajasthani women, I think – drying sarees or pieces of cloth , one length of saree.
Around this time I was writing *A Strange and Sublime Address*. I have always been interested in the way a saree is a yard of cloth which suddenly becomes a very complicated piece of apparel and how that illusion is achieve and how women do it. This made me think of the sarees which we see drying in Calcutta and which I certainly saw drying in the Calcutta house of my childhood. And when I saw those photographs I wanted to put that in my novel in some way. Therefore I have the scene in the terrace – chhad – where Saraswati is wringing those sarees and hanging them up to dry.

SR: But it is there in *A New World* as well.

AC: In *A New World*, what I was doing is, I was taking some of the motifs that I had dealt with in my earlier novels and placing them in the magicless world of postmodernity. I was giving them the resonance of the trajectories of these people's lives – living in America, a divorced family – but I was robbing them of the aura and magic which the dried clothes had in my first novel or even in *Freedom Song*. The clothes are not only suffused with moisture but also with childhood.

SR: The 'wet rag' is a recurring metaphor in your novels.

AC : Maybe. Because the wetness, moisture, baths, water are important to me and you have the bath again in *A New World* as well where the child goes into the shower with the grandmother. In *A New World*, I was consciously concerned with the magic of childhood being taken away so that the redemptive power images can have, however mundane or pointless life may become, which I showed in my first three novels ,I wanted to show that the same succession of images in everyday life, what it meant when it did not have that redemptive power. Some people have said, 'He's written again about everyday life in *A New World*' but it is radically different because it is about everyday life without the magic of childhood. Maybe because Bonny doesn't have a childhood. But one of the things which I have seen for me die out - maybe it is because of my personal change in the way I look at things- in the last decade starting from the eighties is the quality of poetry in ordinary things which was so much a part of art and the world for centuries -for Satyajit Ray, Renoir and others - the poetry of the commonplace. I thought that was an eternal thing but I have seen it die out . I have seen us coming to inhabit a world in which the ordinary has lost its magic. Sometimes I still feel there is magic, when I listen to some neighbour's radio, I heard right now someone blowing a shankh, a conch, somewhere or when I hear the azaan sometimes in the morning. Then I think yes, there are certain moments of magic. Now compared to the time when I grew up, that magic has gone and that notion of magic is not even important as far as postmodernism is concerned; to talk about that magic is also 'bad faith'. To me that magic was always very important. So in *A New World* I wanted to deal with a family and their everyday life and the ordinary when the ordinary is no longer redemptive.

SR: In *A Strange and Sublime Address* ("Lakshmi Poornima Night"), you say 'Rehman's metaphors and faiths end in food'. But food is a very strong metaphor in your fiction as well, isn't it? Why? ('Pieces of boal fish, cooked in turmeric, red chilli paste, onions and garlic, lay in red , fiery sauce in a flat pan; rice , packed into an even white cake, had a spadelike spoon embedded into it; slices of fried aubergine were arranged on a white

dish; dal was served from another pan with a drooping ladle; ....*'A Strange and Sublime Address*)

AC : I like food. I cook as well. I learnt cooking from my mother before I went to England. I didn't want to take any chances because I liked to eat good food. I've been out of touch for a few years but it is like cycling, I wouldn't forget it. There's a great drama , a theatre and epical quality about food, especially in middle class Bengal or India which I wanted to capture in *A Strange and Sublime Address*.

SR : How much has your training as a Hindusthani classical musician influenced your narratology? Are there any reasons to believe in any correspondence between the performing musician and the practising author?

AC : Not consciously. For me they exist in two different compartments. When I sit and sing , I'm not thinking of my novels.
Music is an important constituent of the culture or family I grew up in. My mother is a well known singer with records. My uncle too – he became an engineer and never cut any discs- he is a wonderful singer. However, I discovered classical music for myself. As far as narrative technique is concerned, it is not a conscious thing. If there is any analogy, it is with western music where there are hiatuses and pauses, not with the strictly disciplined world of Indian classical music. But, of late, I've become interested in Indian classical music as a subject . I've written about this in *Afternoon Raag* and "White Lies", a short story. I've become interested in music and the world of capital, music, art and the marketplace. But I have to say that I'm not conscious of the analogies between my narrative technique and Indian classical music.

SR: Why 'afternoon' raag?

AC: Not morning raag; it didn't have the sound. Evening raag was almost a cliché. 'Afternoon raag' because ...you don't hear too many afternoon raags. You hear Bhairav and Tori. After that you are conscious of Gour Sarang and Madhuvanti. Its the time of

intermission and I'm also fond of the afternoon. It's the time of the day I'm most fond of. The original title was *Madhuvanti and the Afternoon Raag*. The publishers made me remove Madhuvanti because of all their problems with bookshops and booksellers not understanding in England a word like Madhuvanti.

SR: Since we have come to the question of title , I'd like to know why 'freedom' is italicised.

AC : It isn't italicised. Its their stylisation ; its got nothing to do with me.

SR: Architecture happens to be a major trope in your fiction. You seem to be interested in exploring the poetics of space through doors, windows, room, house, etc. The concept of enclosed space or space within space seems to be very important in your work.

AC: I'm very fascinated by it. Again it's the idea of life as a text , of interiorities of experience, of things enclosed, of being able to look from one space to another. So I love those films– Renoir, certain French films – which show one looking from a window of one house into the window of another house. I love those scenes. There is a film called *Les enfante dus paradisi* (The Children of God). The Gods are the audience and the children are the actors. It has this shot of the tenement house moving through one space to another, talking from one space to another, in the verandah and the camera captures it. I like that. I love the opening of Naipaul's Miguel Street where one man is talking to another man in a different verandah, "What happening out there , hat?" ; "What happening out there Bogart?". I can't remember exactly but it's the call from one to another. I've always been interested in verandahs. I love the verandah, the balcony. At one point long long ago, when I'd written *A Strange and Sublime Address*, I theorised about it , how the verandah was important to me as an in-between space , with no inside or outside, how the narrator becomes a kind of ghost who is not seen, who sees life unfolding before him and is yet also inside something.

SR: Something similar to this concept occurs in *A New World* as well in a sequence involving Bonny and the grandfather.

AC : Probably. Yeah. The verandah recurs in *A New World* . When I went to England, one of the things I was distressed by was the lack of balconies or verandahs. There was a very clear demarcation between inside and outside. The windows remained closed because of the cold and you would therefore be very alone with yourself and your consciousness. When I came back to St Cyril Road, I found that my consciousness was never alone with itself ; part of it was outside and there were many sounds outside (it was on the third floor) and that signified to me a stream of the subconscious and all these things played on my mind when I was writing the novel . The idea of street sounds keep recurring in *A Strange and sublime Address.*

SR: In *Afternoon Raag* , there are sounds of people coming up and going down.

AC: I can say that was very conscious. I knew that it was important to my writing of the novel itself.

SR: And what about roads? You have even made ironic use of the concept of road by juxtaposing the song 'Lost heart/On a verdant road' with 'Park Circus; Shamsul Huda Haq Road'. How much of 17 Vivekananda Road is factual?

AC: (Laughs) This was not consciously done. I don't know about roads but streets are very dear to me as sites where much happens , especially the tropical streets, the streets in India as opposed to the streets in England. When I stayed there , the windows were closed; I would hear people going to work. There was an underground nearby. I would hear women's heels clicking. There was no loitering, no tarrying. Only the men tarried sometimes because there was a garage where they would admire new cars. Around this time I read this article by Naipaul where he says that the tropical climate allows a man to lead half his life in the open. So people are leading half their experiences, their moments of joys and sorrows and hiatuses before each other, in front of our eyes on the street,

loitering, talking, tarrying, not returning home. Over there all that is happening in a closed space in England. The street , therefore, is not only a place which I use for people to go from one place to another. It's a place where a part of your life is led. It substitutes as drawing room, bedroom and other things. That has always been important to me and consciously so.

SR: The protagonists in your fiction are often exiles in some form or the other and most of them seem to be 'dwelling in travel', as it were. How would you account for the importance of place and travel as tropes in your fiction?

AC: It was something I wasn't aware of but I find that it has happened again and again. I find that Sandeep goes from Bombay to Calcutta.

SR: As I'd pointed out to you earlier, all your novels begin with someone travelling or going somewhere.

AC : Yeah. Its like the story of a changeling child, who is abducted by fairies and taken to another world. That story keeps recurring. In *Freedom Song*, Mini comes to Khuku's house. It's a different world. In *A New World*, its again what lies at the heart of old mythologies, of moving from one kind of mythology, transformed, metamorphosed, of being remade in body and mind. I actually talk a little bit about that , about jetlag, in the beginning of *A New World* and how you live to a different time bodily and how you already have to begin to live to another one. Its almost like being recreated into a new world or almost like life after death.

SR: Its not just a change of place but a change of being.

AC: Yes. I'm not interested in exile but in metamorphosis, a complete change in consciousness and the world. Its an epical reshaping, apocalyptic almost. That's what I'm interested in.

SR: Memory thus invests your novels with a nostalgia, doesn't it? In the *Afternoon Raag* you speak of 'that world , of gestures and wonder, existing in the wide, silent margins of the land, is gone now.' But memory also functions as the Ecoian imago mundi if I'm not wrong. Memory and reverie are brought together in a Benjaminesque association in your fiction. Is this why the letter and the photograph are invested with so much symbolism? Black and White seems to appeal a lot to you. There is the black and white ocean of newspaper, black and white images of the projector, the black and white film "Pyaasa"; Chowringhee on Sunday evening looks like the black and white photograph of another era.

AC : Probably. The black and white photograph is important .

I'm very interested in images. Things start with me often with images and I see the world that I'm writing about through images. An image is a necessary impetus for me to write. It's a visual thing for me. The black and white photograph is an abiding interest. I've written about this in an essay I wrote on Tarkovsky (The Little Magazine). There I've spoken about the way Tarkovsky uses black and white and coloured images together again and again in his films. He does it very oddly. There is a Hollywood convention of using colour for showing the present and black and white for the past or memory. But Tarkovsky does not do that. In Stalker, he begins in the present in black and white and it becomes colour. The strange thing about black and white- and it relates to what I said earlier about post structuralism and postmodernism – in *Of Grammatology*, Spivak talks about the process of erasure and she says that this is one of the ways in which Heidegger and, later, Derrida adopts erasure to avoid the bad faith of fullness, of assuming that certain words connect automatically to some fullness, or some groundedness. Whenever they are used, they are crossed out . So you see the word but its also under erasure. I found it very interesting when meditating on Tarkovsky. The black and white picture is always under erasure. We know that reality is not black and white; we know it as colour. So it is always crossed out. Yet it only in the black and white that we have the experience of fullness which is why it is used for memory or some sort of authenticity or reportage (as in A Battle of Algiers) when they use colour, although its more real, the feeling of reality departs from the frame. So how is it then that fullness and erasure actually exist in

the same place and are not mutually exclusive as the poststructuralists tell us they are? So its interesting. Anyway, I've always been interested in black and white photographs.

SR: Does your fascination with time and the difference in time between places become a means of re-living a moment? The computer in Calcutta shows the time in Claremont; the plane that leaves from Calcutta at halfpast seven reaches Bangladesh at seventhirty as well; the clock always runs ten minutes behind time in *A Strange and Sublime Address*.

AC : In *A Bend in the River*, Naipaul again – not that I think of Naipaul all the time , its just a coincidence…

SR: How do you rate Naipaul ? (This interview was taken in late August, 2001, much before Naipaul was awarded the Nobel Prize.)

AC: I think he is a great writer with great flaws as well, of temperament, of outlook, but he is also capable of producing passages which are of a very high order. I rate him very highly but he can be outrageous at times. Sometimes his fictions just go dead. But he is one of the great writers of the second half of the twentieth century. I have no doubt about that.

Let's come back to the question about time. This time –the world of metamorphosed, the difference in body time – its something that would never have happened before except to spirits in mythologies, of belonging to two different physical worlds . Technology has made that possible for human beings. But a hundred years ago, you would have to write a fantasy about it. So its this process of metamorphosis which Naipaul talks about , a person who travels a lot by plane. ..I fell asleep in Lisbon and wake up in Daresalam…we are like those people who know the magic worlds so that we disintegrate in one place and wake up in another. It carries a mythic resonance. Its not just a problem of going to the bathroom at the right time. Time, in general…when I started writing *A Strange and Sublime Address*, I had inherited this interest from the modernists, in writers like the early Lawrence or Virginia Woolf, the present moment. Even though the story was about my childhood, my past, the presence I wanted to convey was of the present moment. I wanted

the here and nowness of the book to be its primary feeling, not a looking back at childhood.

SR: Your novels can be structured neatly in terms of binaries. Your first novel includes an acknowledgement to Karl Miller, the author of *Doubles*. You too have written a piece called 'Double Trouble'.

AC : Yeah, Karl Miller was the head of the department and he published me in the LRB. That's because he is a great editor. He's written *Doubles*; I've never read the book, just skimped through it.
"Double Trouble" , well, ...binaries, yes, I liked the way you did the essay but its not something I'm conscious of except that I'm interested in incompatibles being present in the same space.

SR: Jayojit has luchi and Bonny has cornflakes.

AC: What I'm trying to say is that for me the novel is the space where I can say one thing and I can say exactly the opposite thing and both can exist. I'm interested in, to quote Fitzgerald, the ability of one mind to hold two opposite ideas in one space is the sign of a fine mind. Therefore, I always get bored with novels, which in spite of their surface complexity, are actually saying something.

SR: How much of you or your writing is nationalist? 'The oranges, white batashas, cucumbers' in *A Strange and Sublime Address* become an optical mimicry of the Indian tricolour but Jayojit fails to understand the 'strange picture of white, yellow, and green' in *A New World.*

AC : It's a very nice observation but again its not conscious. No, I'm very uncomfortable with the idea of the nation.

SR: Tell me something about the play staged in the *Freedom Song.*

AC: It started out as being one of the reasons for writing the novel and it ended by becoming a sort of absence because I found out that I could not actually sit down and write about the play. The actual enactment of the play, when I had seen it in real life, moved me so much not in the political sense, that such kind of a street culture existed in Calcutta and the forlornness of this hope because the people looking from the balcony, this illusory kind of overlapping between home and outside , audience and enactment. You are not sure which one is the audience and which one the play. Again the ephemerality which I'm always interested in ; this is not going to be staged again . Even what is done to the city during the pujas as well. I've written about that but not in any novel. When it came to actually writing about it, something in me rebelled against it and I found I couldn't do it. I said to myself that I won't show the play being staged in the novel.

SR: Why ? It's a striking absence.

AC : It is a striking absence. But I'd rather have a striking absence than write something which I'm supposed to. Bringing the central thing to fruition –I'd rather not do that. Maybe it's a pathological deficiency –but I just cannot do that. Its because of this pathological deficiency that I'm scared of central tropes like Partition or whatever. I've written against it.

SR: Sound, the human voice, ...they are important to you as well, isn't it?

AC: The stuff we are made of –it interests me. Give me some examples. Maybe, I'll be able to explain myself better.

SR: Say, the engaged tone of the phone, the word as mantra...

AC: Yes, very important. Every word is important. Repetition is important and consciously so. Sound is important, sometimes more than meaning. The particular word and the sound of the word are important to me.

SR: Is that why you translate some of the songs and leave others untranslated ?

AC: Bahe nirantar dhara , I've translated that. Godhuli chaya pathe..., tumi ki shudhu chobi... its sort of arbitrary. In a Bimal Roy Bengali film, the song 'Bahe nirantar dhara' is a Brahmo sangeet, where you find a monotheistic abstract God. The sounds are mimetic in that kind of abstraction and to place that in the bath, a secular space, shabbiness of the bath, the redemptiveness of water and sounds without meaning. In *Freedom Song*, Tagore's love songs have a different inscape altogether, mysterious and of a different kind. To have a woman sitting here and singing those songs almost transported her into a dream world. The inscape – 'se jache', 'tar katha' – I've referred to the people passing by as pronouns. The moonlight , a kind of world composed of passerby, streetlight, nothing very concrete. Situated in this world near Park Circus , where this old woman is singing a song in 1993. Its again that movement from one world to another.

SR: Why did you translate some of the songs and not others?

AC: In *A Strange and Sublime Address*, it seemed important to me to bring in the actual words in Bengali , to bring in those Sanskritised Bengali words – Bahe nirantara ananda dhara – within the space of the bathroom. But I wanted to translate it as well – unbroken and unending flows the stream of joy –I wanted to say that because that was a comment perceived on life through the novel. The stream of joy , the two streams , undifferentiated and always in movement ...I also comment on the water. At that time , for me it was particularly significant to put in the Bengali words as well. In *Freedom Song* , I wanted to show what the song was about and what the woman was singing. She sings a Nazrulgeeti which is a kirtan ; it's a rare song. All the others are translated English versions but as for this I felt very tenderly for those words.

On the 'Postmodern Novel':

Sumana Roy: In *A Strange and Sublime Address*, you say – 'The real story, with its beginning, middle and conclusion would never be told because it did not exist'. Are you not then speaking of the text as rhizome? How much of this theory would you say applies to your fiction?

Amit Chaudhuri: When I had finished *A Strange and Sublime Address*, and began to edit it, I found that the actual work –as it finally stands- began to emerge. It was partly a process of writing, rewriting and writing new things, and arranging along with cutting out things as well. When I was editing it, I realised that I did not need to have clear links between one thing and another. When I wrote the first draft, the links were much clearer; when I looked at it again, I saw that it somehow didn't seem right. Yet I was bothered about the fact how I could take out these links without making it seem obviously fractured. But as I began to take them out and keep the things that I liked, I realised that it works better that way. And secondly there is an illusion of the narrative which works much better.

At that time, I also happened to read how William Golding's first novel *The Lord of Flies* had been composed and there was an article about the editor – I can't recollect his name – in the *TLS* and how he had advised Golding to take out the explanatory opening sequence to begin with the boy arriving at the island. And I thought, oh, so this can be done. I started by doing the same. I took out the explanatory part about the life in Bombay and started with the arrival of the boy in Calcutta.

Many years later, a young American student (in one of the few instances that I have taught creative writing) found it very interesting that the narrative moved very well in

spite of the fact that there was no paragraph which necessarily needed to come after another paragraph. There was no necessary causal link between a paragraph and another. *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.

SR: Would you say, then, that you are writing postmodernist fiction or are following postmodern methods of narratology?

AC: As I understand postmodernism, I feel very removed from it in some ways. For me the ability of writing is to renovate our perception of the physical world, of the world we live in – something I have inherited from writers gone by. Modernism has that. Modernism, in spite of its superficial similarities with postmodernism – fractured texts, polyphony of voices – has a great fascination for the real, for the physical world outside. I feel temperamentally more close to that. In postmodern texts, I don't find that dimension of belief in the poetic power of language. I don't find it.

On the Novel as a Narration of Nation:

SR: How much are your novels narrations of nation? Or, how does ideology operate in your work?

AC: I've never consciously set out to write a kind of national novel or a narration of nation. In fact, I've consciously opted to do the opposite. Place has been important to me but the nation is a category that has never interested me intellectually. I would encounter this kind of obsession with the postcolonial novel and the nation with a degree of

bafflement and alienation because it just seemed that this was an all-encompassing trope or metaphor.

So, ideology, how it operates in my work, is not for me to say. But now I am becoming interested in the idea of the nation, especially, in the context of music. For I feel that Hindusthani classical music, in a way, does map our country. I want to explore this idea.

On the Narrative of Music:

SR: But music is also a narrative.

AC: Yes, music is a narrative but Hindusthani classical music is not a narrative in the sense Western classical music is. With Western classical, you have a humanistic dimension. You can, by looking at certain scales or notes, give them a kind of allegorical, emotional significance but not so in Indian classical music. It is far more difficult to do. It is about a landscape but not in a mimetic sense. It is about a landscape as a language is about a landscape, that is, just as the word 'spring' suggests 'spring' and we cannot ever know spring outside of this word, similarly, the word 'basant' suggests basant and we cannot ever know 'basant' outside of this text. The Raag Basant is not a mimesis of basant. There are no evocations of the nightingale or the cuckoo in Basant Raag as there is in the Pastoral symphony. This is exactly what I am trying to explore.

On the Narrative which operates through the Mimesis of Form:

SR: In the *Picador Anthology of Indian writing*, you talk about the length of the Indian English Novel as a mimesis of the 'Indian' trope. Are your novels, which are significantly shorter in length, then a conscious moving away from this narratological mimesis of form?

AC: I'm not consciously moving away from it. I'm just a person who wants to be given the freedom to write a novel of a certain length and when you begin to interpret it, you feel why must the 'Indian Novel' be representative, as it is in critical terminology, of length? It is not because of this easy mimetic interpretation. In fact, the only sizeable book that I've produce is the *Picador Anthology*. That is my Great Indian Novel, but in a completely different way, say from Rushdie's, because the fiction that one is trying to create here is 'Indian Literature'. 'Indian Literature' certainly does not exist as a given out there; it certainly is not the sum of its parts. That would be a Bodelian's nightmare; in the Bodelian library, all the books are there. Similarly, the idea of Indian Literature being a sum of its parts is what institutions like the Sahitya Akademi would like to do; produce a tome or three or four tomes in which there is one page devoted to every major writer or whatever. You have nothing but a mirage in front of you. So the fiction you have to persuasively create through bringing together different components is the fiction of Indian Literature in this anthology. So, in a sense, it's a fictional work, my one big fiction.

On the Narrative of the Poetic Novel:

SR: Is the decision to not number (except *Afternoon Raag*) or name chapters in your novels a conscious narratological choice?

AC: I think, to a certain extent, it might be that the prose poem or the poem has had more of a formal impact on me than the novel has had. That is, my idea of what appears on a printed page and what appears in a book or any work of a certain length is more formed by my readings of poetry than my readings of fiction. So, stanzas, sections of poems, the way they are not named, the way they sequentially go into each other; there is no kind of closure between one and the other in a very strict way. That, in visual terms, has affected

me more when writing fiction probably rather than the conventional novel with its chapter headings.

On the Narrative of the Confessional and Autobiographical Novel

SR: Do you see your novels in the tradition of the confessional novel? And how far does the autobiographical narrative (especially after the publication of E-minor) operate in your work?

AC: See, E-Minor is not a novel at all. It is a narrative in verse. And the urge to confess in me is always balanced by the urge to conceal. So there is a lot that is not there purely because of the formal necessities of the work for the pressure to remain in that form exerting itself upon the work. You can't say or confess everything.
In my writing, it is sometimes a mystery to me, how day to day events suddenly becomes to me a space with fictional possibilities and I am not talking about a theme over here. Of course, a theme has occurred to me as well, say, when writing some of my stories. Suddenly, for the first time in my life, themes began to occur to me; for instance, in writing the story about the music teacher, I suddenly became interested in the theme of a guru living in the modern world and of the raag and music in the modern world. That theme had a power exerting itself upon me. Before that, what had usually happened to me was – something in life, which could be something like today, was suddenly, by some little gesture of estrangement, transformed into fictional space. So what I have always been interested in is how the world around you begins to have the qualities of a text. The world around you, when you are going for a walk, or watching street theatre, or when you are going to a relative's house, and, then that, at some point, has become transformed into a text. That now has the potential for meaning that a collection of signs has. That, on the one hand, seems to me autobiographical because it deals with my life but its not interested in telling you about my life because that's not the point of the thing. The point is to explore, how, what I call my life, has suddenly assumed the dimensions of

textuality, of something creative. So it's not autobiographical because it is exploring how moments in life have the qualities of a created moment, as in theatre, or in a text. So that's what I have been interested in exploring.

I've still to write my real autobiographical novel. I've never felt that I'm an autobiographical writer. Maybe I'll be one because there's a lot to write about. But my interest is always in using life as a catalyst to speak about something else and usually I'm interested in this catalytic process. What is it? What am I using life for? So that's what interests me. Not to convey the truth of my life to you. No.

Published Chapters

1. "The Text as Rhizome: Amit Chaudhuri's Theory of Fiction" in Rajul Bhargava and Shubhshree (eds.) *Of Narratives, Narrators*, Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2004, 227-40.

2. "Aalap: In conversation with Amit Chaudhuri" in Sheobhusan Shukla and Anu Shukla (eds.) *The Novels of Amit Chaudhuri*, New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2004, 159-86.

3. "Novelist on Narratives: Amit Chaudhuri in Conversation", in Rajul Bhargava and Shubhshree (eds.) *Of Narratives, Narrators*, Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2004, 370-374.

4. "'Eh Stupid!' 'Saala!': (In)fusioning the 'Impolite in the fiction of Amit Chaudhuri in Ranjan Ghosh (ed.) *(In)fusion Approach: Theory, Contestation, Limits*, Lanham and Oxford: University Press of America, 2006, 305-24.

5. "Dreaming without subtitles: Amit Chaudhuri's 'This is not fusion'" in *Himal Southasian*, June 2007.

6. "Metaphors of travel and movements: Amit Chaudhuri's music album" in *The Hindu Literary Review*, June 3, 2007.