THE OPTIC AND THE SEMIOTIC IN THE NOVELS OF AMIT CHAUDHURI

SUMANA ROY

THESIS SUBMITTED FOR Ph.D DEGREE UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF PROFESSOR G. N. RAY AT THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH BENGAL, 2007

Contents

Acknowledgements

Every PhD student begins by acknowledging her gratitude and debt to her supervisor and I will continue with the tradition; only, in my case, my gratitude would extend to subjects beyond the scope of this dissertation. Among all the generous gifts that I have received from Professor G. N. Ray, I must mention one that I value over others – his patience with a moody doctoral student like me.

I would also like to acknowledge my gratitude to two of my professors, Professor K. K. Roy (University of North Bengal) and Professor Abhijit Mazumdar (Siliguri College of Science and Arts), the first from whom I learnt to 'read' the novel and the latter who, much earlier, had taught me the virtues of close reading. I am also grateful to Professor A. K. Singh (Vice-Chancellor, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Open University, Ahmedabad), for encouragement, affection, and unconditional support, always; for never saying 'no'.

I'm grateful to Sukanya, Ananya and Nilanjana for their gifts of friendship and forgiveness in equal measure, for letting me be their friend in spite of my truant and forgetful ways during the period in which this dissertation was written; to Aaron and Diana, for the never-ending discussions and long walks and late dinners in Germany; to my cousins, Mitti and Troy, for keeping me sane by refusing to let me grow up; to Aarti, Santona and Sapna for the temporary oases of comfort; and to my brother and father-in-law, the props in my conscience during my numerous runaway moods.

This PhD would never have been written had it not been for a few people. I'm grateful to

Amit Chaudhuri, the writer, the musician and the person, for every word, in the text and outside it; to

my parents, who made me look at the sky when they taught me my first nursery rhyme, "… Like a diamond in the sky"; and to

Ranjan, for everything, every time.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The shortest way to define semiotics would be to say that it is a study of signs. And one of the broadest is that of Umberto Eco who states that "semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign".[1] A text is an assemblage of signs (words, images, sounds, gestures) constructed and interpreted with reference to the conventions associated with a genre and in a particular medium of communication.

Broadly speaking, there are two divergent traditions in semiotics stemming respectively from the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1914) and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). In his *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure wrote that:

> It is ... possible to conceive of a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life. It would form part of social psychology, and hence of general psychology. We shall call it semiology (from the Greek semeion, 'sign'). It would investigate the nature of signs and the laws governing them.[2]

While for the linguist Saussure 'semiology' was "a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life", to the philosopher Charles Peirce, the field of study which he called 'semiotic' was the "formal doctrine of signs".[3] Working quite independently from Saussure across the Atlantic, Peirce borrowed his term from the seventeenth century British philosopher John Locke. Acting as another bridge between traditions, Umberto Eco in his *Theory of Semiotics* (1976) sought "to combine the structuralist perspective of Hjelmslev with the cognitive-interpretative semiotics of Peirce".[4]

---

[1] Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 7.
[2] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* trans. Wade Baskin (London: Fontana 1983), 15-16.
[3] Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Writings* 8 volumes. Ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss & Arthur W. Burks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-58), 2.227.
[4] Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1999), 251.

Peirce believed that "we think only in signs".[5] But "nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign," he added.[6] My work employs the Peircean distinctions between the *sign* and the *object* within a broadly Sausserean framework. Pierce said that:

A sign ... (in the form of a *representamen*) is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the *representamen*.[7]

The interaction between the *representamen*, the object and the *interpretant* is referred to by Peirce as "semiosis". Umberto Eco uses the phrase "unlimited semiosis" to refer to the way in which this could lead (as Peirce was well aware) to a series of successive interpretants (potentially) ad infinitum.[8]

In incorporating the Peircean distinctions to emphasise (of course indirectly) the referential potential of the signified within the Saussurean model, my work makes use of three modes:

i. Symbol/ symbolic: a mode in which the signifier does not resemble the signified but which is fundamentally arbitrary or purely conventional – so that the relationship must be learned, language in general, numbers or the traffic lights, for example.

ii. Icon/ iconic: a mode in which the signifier is perceived as resembling or imitating the signified, a portrait or cartoon for example.

---

[5] Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Writings* 8 volumes. Ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss & Arthur W. Burks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-58), 2.302.
[6] Ibid., 2.172.
[7] Ibid., 2.2228.
[8] Ibid., 1.339.

iii. Index/ indexical: a mode in which the signifier is not arbitrary but is directly connected in some way to the signified – this link can be observed or inferred. Examples would include 'natural signs' (smoke, footprints), medical symptoms (pain, a rash), measuring instruments, 'signals' (a phone ringing), personal 'trademarks' (handwriting) and indexical words ('that', 'this', 'here', 'there').

Symbolic signs such as language are usually highly conventional; iconic signs always involve some degree of conventionality; indexical signs 'direct the attention to their objects by blind compulsion'.[9] "All words, sentences, books and other conventional signs are symbols," said Peirce.[10] A symbol is a sign "whose special significance or fitness to represent just what it does represent does in nothing but the very fact of there being a habit, disposition, or other effective general rule that it will be so interpreted take, for example, the word "man". These three letters are not in the least like a man; nor is the sound with which they are associated".[11] It is clear that Peircean symbols are not limited to words.

Turning to icons, Peirce declared that an iconic sign represents its object "mainly by its similarity".[12] Peirce originally termed such modes, "likenesses".[13] He added that "every picture (however conventional its method)" is an icon.[14] Susanne Langer argues that "the picture is essentially a symbol, not a duplicate, of what it represents".[15] For Peirce, icons included "every diagram, even although there be no sensuous resemblance between it and its object, but only an analogy between the relations of the parts of each other".[16] "Many diagrams resemble their objects not at all in looks; it is only in respect to the relations of

---

[9] Ibid., 2.306
[10] Ibid., 2.292.
[11] Ibid., 4.447.
[12] Ibid, 2.276.
[13] Ibid., 1.558.
[14] Ibid., 2.279.
[15] Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite & Art* (New York: Mentor, 1951), 67.
[16] Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Writings*, 8 volumes. Ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss & Arthur W. Burks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-58), 2.279.

their parts, that their likeness consists".[17] Semioticians generally maintain that there are no 'pure' icons – there is always an element of cultural convention involved.

An index 'indicates' something: for example, "a sundial or clock indicates the time of day".[18] An indexical sign is like "a fragment torn away from the object".[19] The relationship is not based on "mere resemblance";[20] "similarity or analogy" is not what defines the index.[21] While a photograph is also perceived as resembling that which it depicts, Peirce noted that a photograph is not only iconic but indexical: "photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that in certain respects they are exactly like the objects they represent".[22]

It is easy to slip into referring to Peirce's three forms as "types of signs", but they are not necessarily mutually exclusive: a sign can be an icon, a symbol and an index, or any combination. Peirce was aware of this: for instance, he insisted that "it would be difficult if not impossible to instance an absolutely pure index, or to find any sign absolutely devoid of the indexical quality".[23]

The reason for opting for a semiotic method to study the works of Amit Chaudhuri was this: semiotics can help to denaturalise theoretical assumptions in academia just as in everyday life. For a writer whose writing and music are so rooted to the everyday, semiotics seemed, to me, the most suitable approach to study the texts. Stuart Hall said that our "systems of signs ... speak us as much as we speak in and through them".[24] Chaudhuri's work demands that we locate and interpret the signs at work in his

---

[17] Ibid., 2.282.
[18] Ibid., 2.285.
[19] Ibid., 2.231.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., 2.305.
[22] Ibid., 2.281.
[23] Ibid., 2.306.
[24] Stuart Hall, 'Culture, the Media and the "Ideological Effect"', in *Mass Communication and Society* ed. James Curran, Michael Gurevitch & Janet Woollacott (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), 328.

semiosphere for as Voloshinov declared, "whenever a sign is present, ideology is present too".[25]

In Chaudhuri, that ideology is the ideology of the impure, a challenge to the illusory claim of the 'authentic', a claim, as a boatman, to many streams, the 'then' flowing through the 'now', the 'here' moving to the 'there' and, also, the aesthetics of the air where nothing is ever separate, where tiny particles cohabit with each other abandoning difference. "The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut," said Foucault,

> beyond the title, the first lines and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network ... The book is not simply the object that one holds in one's hands ... Its unity is variable and relative.[26]

Texts are framed by others in many ways. The debts of a text to other texts are seldom acknowledged. And, even if they are, in the scholarly apparatus of academic writing, debts to other traditions are never recorded. Claude Levi-Strauss's notion of the bricoleur who creates improvised structures by appropriating pre-existing materials which are ready to hand is now well know within the field of cultural studies. The bricoleur works with signs, constructing new arrangements by adopting existing signifieds as signifiers and "speaking" "through the medium of things".[27]

My focus is primarily on Chaudhuri the bricoleur, and his focus on the optic, not just because Chaudhuri's semiotic is primarily visual[28] but because, as Messaris says, "with regard to images, most people in most societies are mostly confined to the role of

---

[25] Valentin N. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (New York: Seminar Press, 1973), 10.

[26] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Tavistock, 1974), 23.

[27] Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Wiedenfeld & Nicolson, 1974), 20.

[28] "Things start with me, often, with images. An image is a necessary impetus for me to write. It's a visual thing for me." See Sumana R. Ghosh, "Aalap: In conversation with Amit Chaudhuri" in *The Novels of Amit Chaudhuri: An Exploration in the Alternative Tradition* eds. Anu Shukla and S. B. Shukla (Delhi: Swarup and Sons, 2004), 181.

spectator of other people's productions".[29] Chaudhuri's "production" of images links him to, as I will show in the following chapters, European modernism for, as Glen Macleod says,

> The ancient parallel between literature and the visual arts – i.e. painting, sculpture, and architecture – becomes newly relevant in the twentieth century. Painters were the first to explore the revolutionary possibilities of Modernism, so that painting became the leading art form. Modernist writers often patterned their literary experiments on parallels drawn from the visual arts.[30]

The Impressionists, Monet and Manet, especially the latter, the post-impressionist Cezanne, Matisse during his "Fauve" phase, Duchamp and Dali, Joan Miro's "automatism" – all of them have influenced Chaudhuri and this is especially evident in his early work. His evolution as a writer (and musician) can be discerned in his move towards a more home-bred tradition, to Tagore and Jamini Roy, both products of Bengali modernity, both having realised their aesthetic through a negotiation with the 'outside'.

This may, all very well, be forced into the paradigms of postcolonialism; as Meenakshi Mukherjee says,

> It (postcolonialism) brings severely into question the old idea of the autotelic nature of literary text and the sealed anti-septic notion of 'artistic' value uncontaminated by the political circumstances of its production and reception – forcing everyone involved in the discipline to rethink the limitations of the Eurocentric/ universalist aesthetic norms.[31]

But Mukherjee almost answers the question as to why Chaudhuri's texts do not yield returns when investigated through the postcolonial filter.

---

[29] Paul Messaris, *Visual 'Literacy': Image, Mind and Reality* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 121.
[30] Glen Macleod, 'The Visual Arts' in *Modernism* ed. Michael Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 194.
[31] Harish Trivedi and Meenakshi Mukherjee, ed. *Interrogating Postcolonialism* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2000), 4.

Because the post-colonial analytical strategies work best where the dispossession of language, religion and culture has been of the most severe order there is just a possibility that any reading of a so-called post-colonial text might get subtly tilted in that direction, or only those texts might get highlighted that lend themselves to such readings.[32]

This has been the postcolonial critic's problem with Chaudhuri's work: as Arun P. Mukherjee says,

Its (postcolonialism's) vocabulary is too generalised and too monolithic;[33]

"too monolithic" to deal with texts, like the subject of this work, which talk about the poetics of enrichment that the cultural encounters produced. In texts like Chaudhuri's, where the provincial manages to survive, by waging little wars on the forces of globalisation, postcolonial discourse fails to create meanings, or ruptures through which meaning-making might become possible.

Chaudhuri's work, in spite of being situated in, what Homi Bhabha adapting Freud's *das Unheimliche* terms, "unhomeliness – that is the condition of extraterritorial and cross-cultural initiations",[34] cannot be called, what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, in an unfortunate nomenclature, termed "minor literature" – the literature of minorities, immigrants, and others who live in, write in, and are "forced to serve" a "deterritorialised" European "language that is not their own". In this literature, "everything takes on a collective value," in contrast to "major literatures," in which "the individual concern (familial, marital, and so on) joins with other no less individual concerns, the social milieu serving as a mere environment or a background."[35] Chaudhuri's work is situated in the cusp of these two, "minor" and "major" literatures – he is a miniaturist but not a 'minorist'; in his work there is no hierarchy between foreground and background, between character and context. And in this, again, he owes

[32] Ibid., 7.
[33] Ibid.,19.
[34] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 9.
[35] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 19, 17.

his allegiance to the early European painters, but also to figures like Michael Madhusudan Dutt, in whom there is no 'real' distinction between the personal and the political.[36]

In his essay, "Poles of Recovery: From Dutt to Chaudhuri",[37] Amit Chaudhuri writes about a few writers in whom "the impulses of 'disowning' and 'recovery' are seen to shape ... substantially, the history of modern Indian writing".[38] The essay turns out to be as much an analysis of the emergence of the modern in Indian writing as a manifesto of the self at work in his writing. The introductory paragraph sees the invocation of his own history of writing in, what is, a formal essay in an academic journal:

I, a Bengali, had grown up in Bombay, and, not having been taught Bengali in school, didn't know it well enough to write poetry or fiction in it. My literary models and aspirations belonged to the English language; yet, secretly, I'd been troubled by what my inquisitor implied: that you can't achiever anything worthwhile in literature unless you write in your 'own' language.[39]

This discovery of his own disquiet leads him to other discoveries:

... in the genesis of modernity in Bengal and India – is another narrative, to do with the secular, middle-class Indian self's struggle between disowning and recovering its 'Indianness', a struggle that ... I discovered was also a paradigm around which a substantial part of modern Indian literature and culture was structured.[40]

During the course of the essay, Chaudhuri quotes Ramanujan –

---

[36] Writing about Dutt's poem, "Tilottama Sambhava" which makes use of the "grand mythology of our ancestors", and then quoting the poet's letter to his friend, Raj Narain, Chaudhuri writes, "Dutt's remarks, and, indeed, the poem he was them working on, record the relocation of the mythic – which, till then, had been situated in the culture of a community – within the half-truths and subconscious of a new, colonial bourgeoisie". See Amit Chaudhuri, 'Poles of Recovery: From Dutt to Chaudhuri', *Interventions* Vol. 4(1), 93.

[37] Amit Chaudhuri, 'Poles of Recovery: From Dutt to Chaudhuri' *Interventions* Vol. 4 (1) 2002, 89-105.

[38] ibid., 89-90.

[39] ibid., 90.

[40] ibid., 90-1.

Even one's own tradition is not one's birthright; it has to be earned, repossessed .... One comes face to face with it sometimes in faraway places, as I did;[41]

it is, as if, Chaudhuri is talking about himself and reminding himself about his own 'recovery' of tradition at the same time. For this is Chaudhuri talking about himself:

"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."[42]

Difference, after all, is a condition of our existence rather than a conscious decision, a condition that produces the aesthetic of the aleatory, a condition over which the writer or the subject of the writing has only as much control as he does over the reflection in the mirror or the colour of the sky.

In tracing the sources and resources of traditions in Chaudhuri's work, I have chosen to focus on the social semiotic, the body, food, clothes, the colloquial, the visual of the everyday that is usually not loaded with signification that binds them in Chaudhuri's eye;[43] this is not only because an analysis of the social semiotic downplays the rhetoric of 'inclusion' and 'exclusion', the conceit of a postcolonial club, but most importantly because Chaudhuri is a writer of the everyday. "The stuff we are made of – that interests me."[44]

"The movement between one world and another within the same space," says Chaudhuri, "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

---

[41] Ibid., 98.
[42] See Sumana R. Ghosh, "Aalap: In conversation with Amit Chaudhuri" in *The Novels of Amit Chaudhuri: An Exploration in the Alternative Tradition* eds. Anu Shukla and S. B. Shukla (Delhi: Swarup and Sons, 2004), 168.
[43] "Bangla was, for me, a graphic experience.... It resonated for me in many ways.", ibid., 166.
[44] Ibid.,184.

by the use of *shajana* tree and Colgate toothpaste in the same sentence."[45] That is why Chaudhuri's texts live like postcards, carrying possibility of meanings to places where they travel, where the postcard carries, at one and the same time, the fingerprints and handwriting, and the marked stamps of journeys. The new composite form that enacts the cross-cultural energies, made of a union of disparate fragments of post-colonial inheritance, is, in Chaudhuri, a matter of seamless intercultural fusion. His works sometimes melds, at other times sets these resources against each other. The result of this intercultural dynamic is transformative – a work that would have been unimaginable within the confines of one or another culture.

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

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

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

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

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

---

[46] Amit Chaudhuri, *Real Time. Stories and a Reminiscence* (London: Picador, 2002), 74.
[47] William Godwin, *Things As They Are or the Adventures of Caleb Williams* ed. Maurice Hindle (London: Penguin, 1988), 350.
[48] Elizabeth D. Ermarth 1992. *Sequel to History* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 14.

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

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

Chapter One : Student life in Oxford : A
Chapter Two : Narrrator's life in Oxford (Shehnaz and Sharma) : B
Chapter Three : Mandira's life in Oxford (2 years after the narrator's arrival) : C
Chapter Four : Parents' life in Bombay : D
Chapter Five : The narrator and Shehnaz in Oxford : E
Chapter Six : Sohanlal's music-lessons : F1
Buying the first tanpura : F2
Chapter Seven : Narrator's life with Sharma (before Shehnaz) : G
Chapter Eight : Moving around Oxford : H
Chapter Nine : The room in Oxford : I
Chapter Ten : Life in Oxford and escapade to London : J
Chapter Eleven : Parents, Chitrakaki, Chhaya and Maya in Bombay : K
Chapter Twelve : Sohanlal's and Mohanlal's music lessons in Bombay : L
Chapter Thirteen : Chhaya , Maya, Sindhi widow in Bombay : M
Chapter Fourteen : Parents in Bombay : N1

Parents in England before the narrator's birth : N2

Chapter Fifteen : Narrator with Shehnaz in Oxford : O

Chapter Sixteen : Shehnaz in Oxford : P

Chapter Seventeen : Mandira in Oxford : Q

Chapter Eighteen : Oxford : R

Chapter Nineteen : Parents, Chitrakaki in Bombay; shifted to new house : S1

Narrator in new house in Bombay : S2

Chapter Twenty : Parents moved from Bombay to Calcutta : T1

Father's life in Calcutta as Student : T2

Father's life in East Bengal : T3

Trip to father's aunt's son in DumDum : T4

Chapter Twentyone : The 'other' England : U

Chapter Twentytwo : Mandira, Shehnaz and Sharma in Oxford : V1

Covered Market : V2

Chapter Twentythree : Sohanlal as a boy in Rajasthan : W1

Sohanlal's performance in front of the narrator : W2

Chapter Twentyfour : Bombay : X

Chapter Twentyfive : Calcutta : Y1

Narrator as a child in Calcutta : Y2

Narrator back from Calcutta to Oxford : Y3

Narrator in Calcutta writing to Shehnaz in America : Y4

Chapter Twentysix : 'She' with 'him' in Oxford : Z1

'She' going back : Z2

Chapter Twentyseven : Narrator's first day in Oxford :£1

Narrator's second day in Oxford; meeting with Sharma : £2

Narrator reading Lawrence with Sharma : £3

Narrator remembers his mother cooking sweetmeats for him : £4

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

→S1→S2→Y4→Y3→£3→£4

T1→T4

W1→W2→L+F1→N1

V1→Z1→Z2

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

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

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

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

FIGURE 1.

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

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

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

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

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

swaying, this *swing* in which confused materials goes about taking shape[50]

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

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

Figure 1

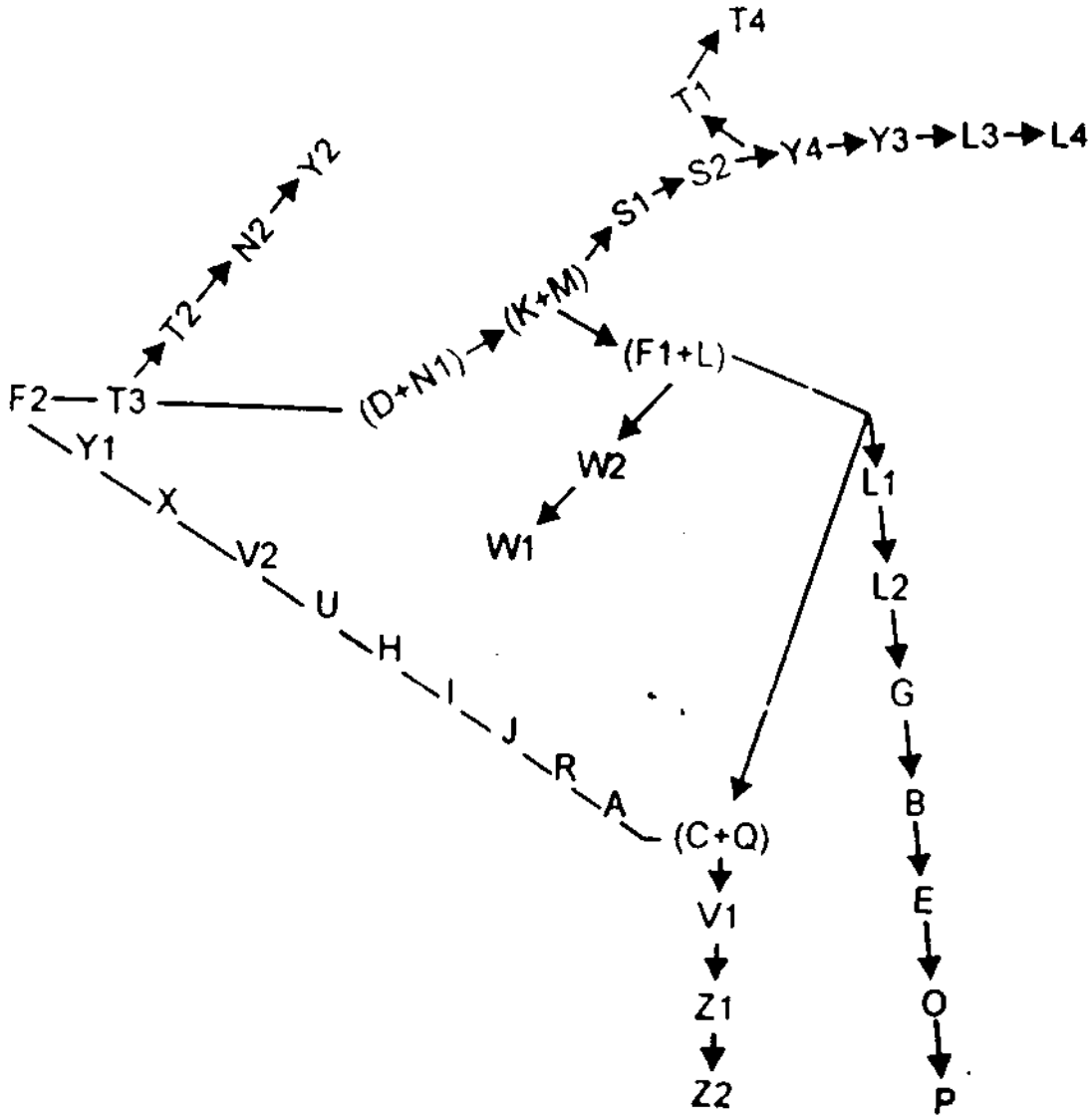

T4
T1
Y4
Y3
L3
L4
S2
S1
(K+M)
(D+N1)
T2
N2
Y2
F2
T3
(F1+L)
W2
W1
L1
L2
G
B
E
O
P
Y1
X
V2
U
H
I
J
R
A
(C+Q)
V1
Z1
Z2

Figure 2

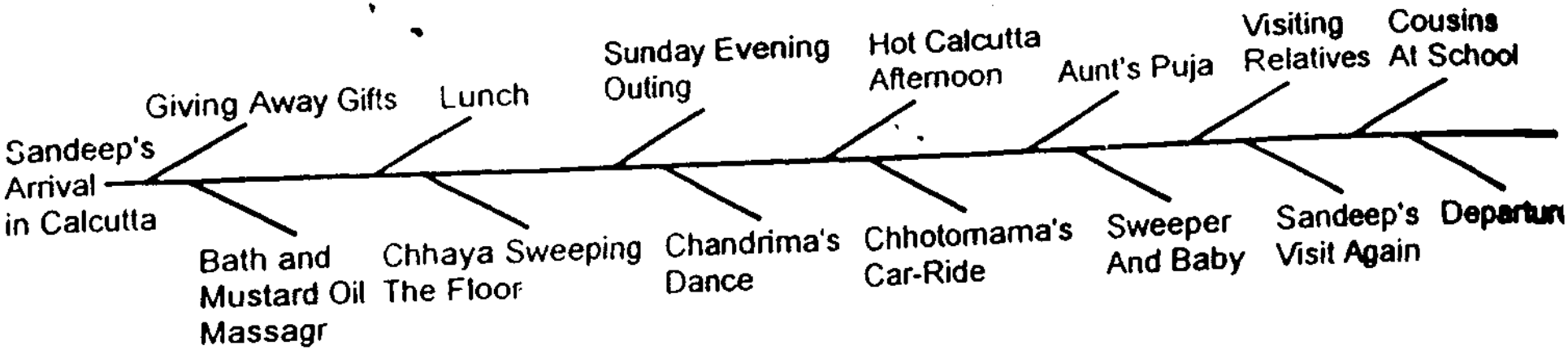

Sandeep's Arrival in Calcutta
Giving Away Gifts
Bath and Mustard Oil Massagr
Lunch
Chhaya Sweeping The Floor
Sunday Evening Outing
Chandrima's Dance
Hot Calcutta Afternoon
Chhotomama's Car-Ride
Aunt's Puja
Sweeper And Baby
Visiting Relatives
Sandeep's Visit Again
Cousins At School
Departur

FIGURE 2.

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

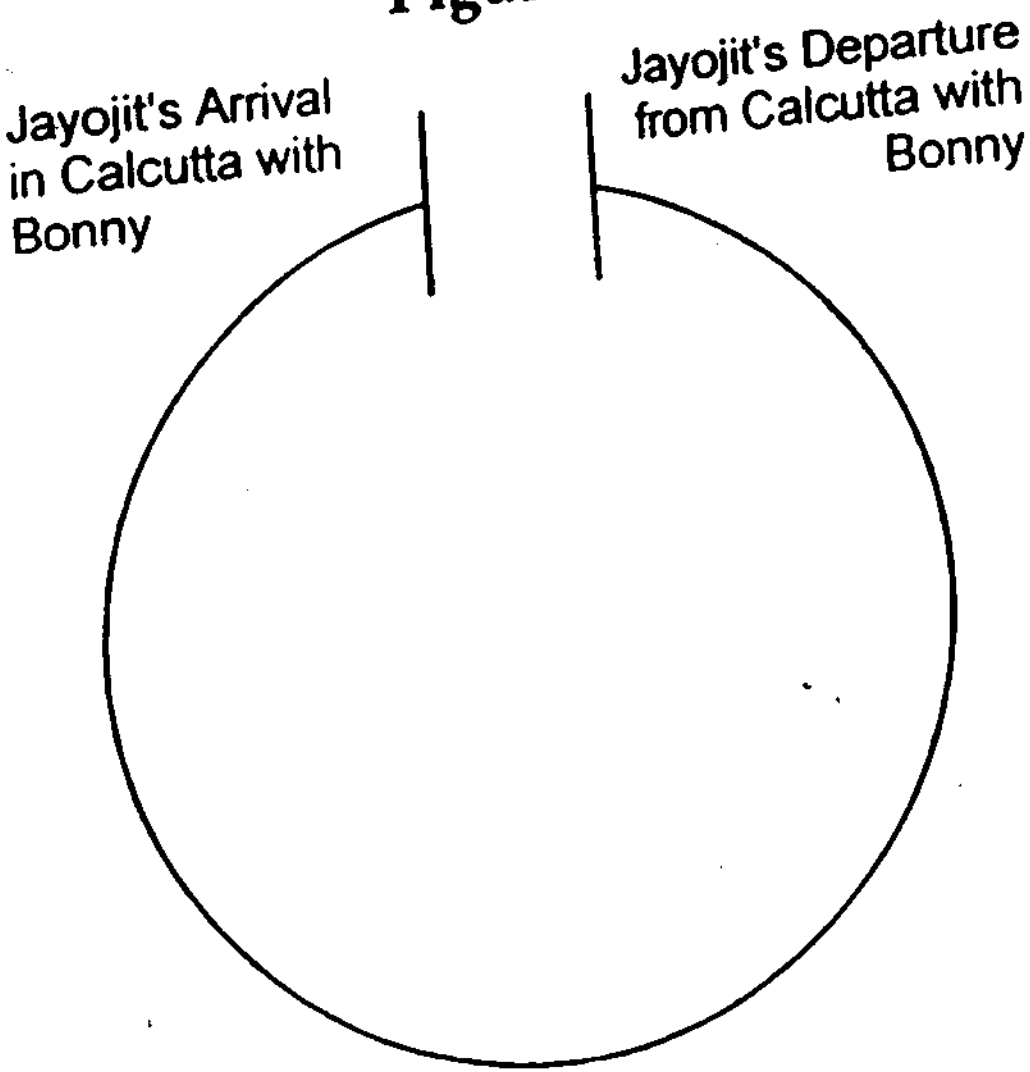
The road ended, and it branched off, and on the other side to two narrower ones that led to a great field, a maidan, with a pair of poles at either end which were supposed to be goalposts (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 58).

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

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

[51] Kathy Acker, *Bodies of Work* (London. New York: Serpent's Tail, 1997), 12.
[52] Julio Cortazar, *Blow-up and Other Stories* trans. Paul Blackburn. New York: Pantheon, 1967), 185.

Figure 3


Jayojit's Arrival in Calcutta with Bonny
Jayojit's Departure from Calcutta with Bonny

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

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

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

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

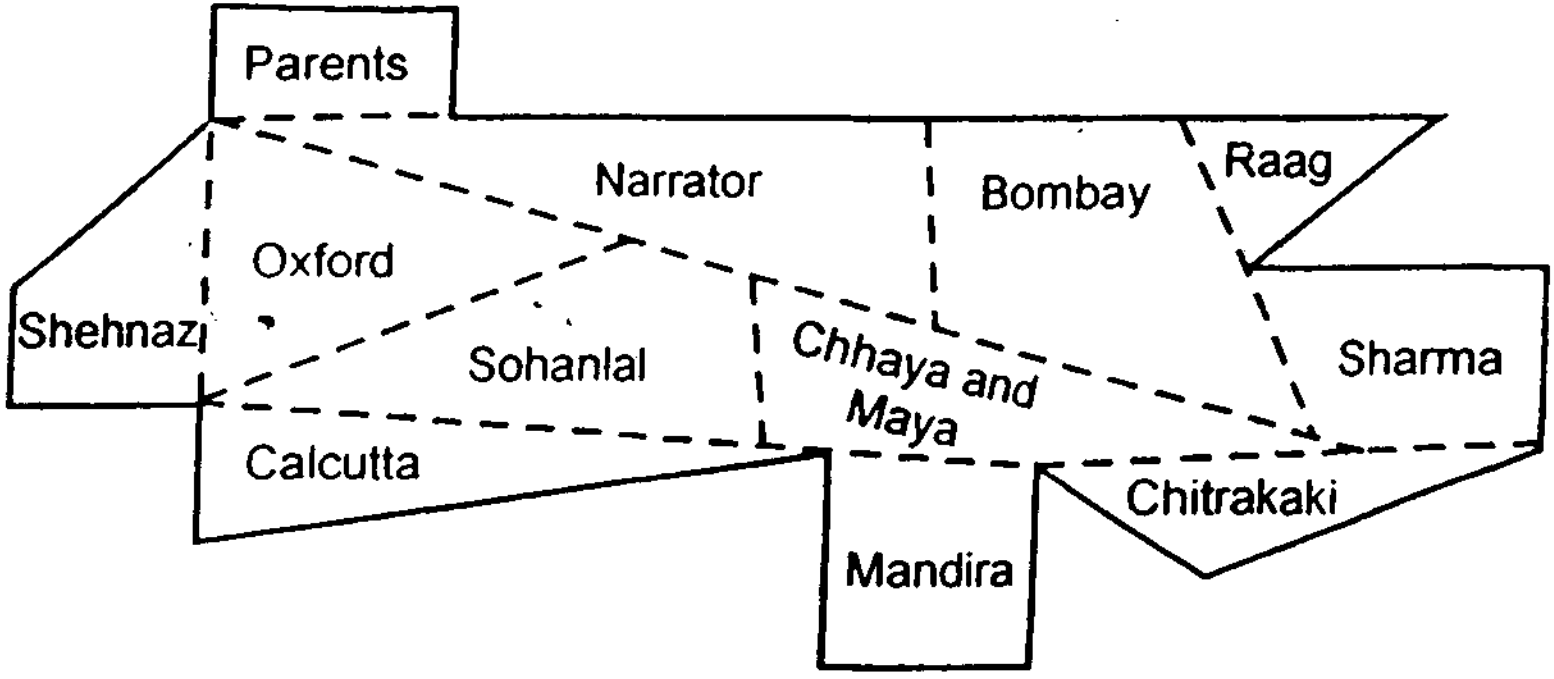
FIGURE 3.

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

---

[53] Roman Jakobson, 'The dominant' in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views* eds. Ladislav Matekja and Krystna Pomorska (Cambridge: Mass. & London: MIT Press, 1971), 108.
[54] Tzvetan Todorov, *Genres in Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 53.

Figure 4


Parents
Narrator
Bombay
Raag
Oxford
Shehnazi
Sohanlal
Chhaya and Maya
Sharma
Calcutta
Chitrakaki
Mandira

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

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

FIGURE 4.

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

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

Figure 5

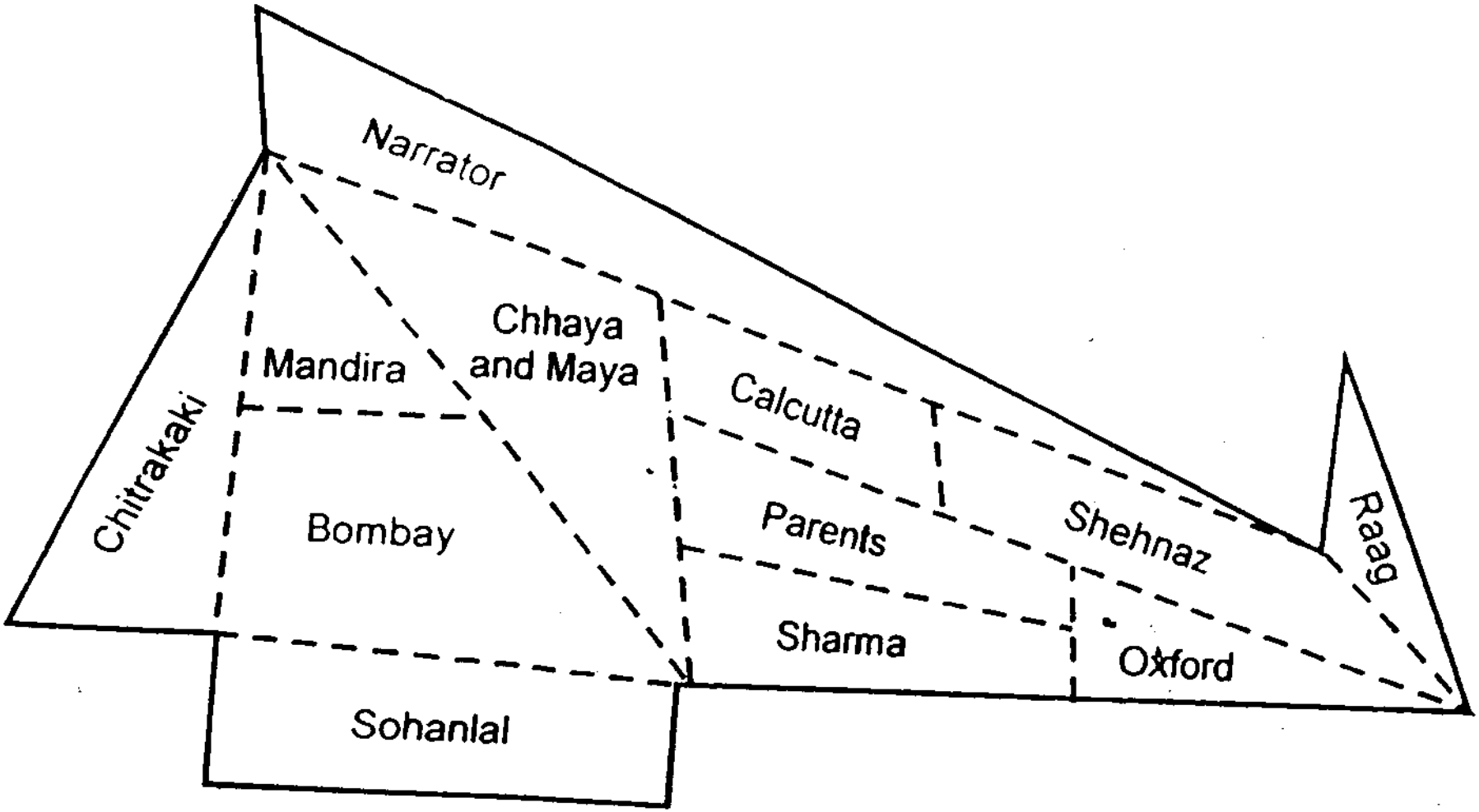

Narrator
Chhaya
and Maya
Mandira
Chitrakaki
Calcutta
Bombay
Parents
Shehnaz
Raag
Sharma
Oxford
Sohanlal

FIGURE 5.

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

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

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

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

---

[56] Ibid., 7.
[57] Ibid., 9.
[58] Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining: Modern to Postmodern* (Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 248.

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

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

Whose Space is it anyway? The Politics of Translation on the Printed Page

Moving beyond the simplistic notions of fidelity to the 'source text'/ 'original' that discourses on translation politics entail, I intend to show how Amit Chaudhuri, through an intersemiotic translation in his novels and short stories, succeeds in creating a 'third code' on the printed page that does away with the unilinearity and monologicality of the static predisposition of the 'pure' in identity politics. In aligning translation with the politics of identity, I, therefore, refrain from seeing translation as a purely linguistic fact; rather, I shall show how the process of semioticization of Chaudhuri's texts, bound as they are with the cultural histories of communities, reveal the role of ideology in the diffusion of the translational semiotic at work in the texts.

Chaudhuri creates texts that are hetero*graphic* in ways more than one: his translation grid is not the simple axes of the 'indigenous' tongue and 'foreign' language in a situation of 'diglossia'. Rather his translational ideologeme, in delimiting itself of strict semiotic and semantic transactions, is a novel and inventive polysystem: due to the absence of geographical, historical or sociological variants in the target language, Chaudhuri is often forced to "invent" a 'language' because of the 'non-existence' of one. In writing for a unilingual reader, Chaudhuri produces a 'representation' of the source culture by using more than nativism-loaded linguistic signifiers on the printed page: the *visual* culture of his texts consists of tropes of various origin/ sources- the Bengali alphabet (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 81), a Bangla word (*A Strange and Sublime Address,* 118), a religious motif reproduced per se (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 146), interlingual reproduction of a manner of speaking (*Freedom Song*, 6), wall graffiti (*Freedom Song*, 11), onomatopoeic reproduction (*A Strange and Sublime Address,* 201), the cry of a bird

(*A Strange and Sublime Address,* 128) and so on. It is the identity of this printed page which the act of translation produces that is the subject of my chapter.

Taking recourse to Spivak's arguments which trouble the easy identifications of 'foreign' and 'home' culture, the identity of the Chaudhuri-translating-self is subsumed neither by the host nor the receiving culture; this self has no single 'home' to offer to the translated work. Translations, like the original works of diasporic writers, become caught up in networks of readership that involve audiences, which are *not* defined by one national frame. By providing a preface and a post face to his 'transcreations' – an extension of what lies beyond the 'printed page'- Chaudhuri ensures that the reader has a contextualised and informed understanding of the difficult text she is reading. The prefatory explanatory note in *A Strange and Sublime Address* is not an extraneous appendage to the novel. Salman Rushdie claimed that migrants are 'translated beings'. Writers like Chaudhuri stand on the border between writing and translation, infusing both of these activities with new meanings. The radical bilingualism (I use the word to include sensibilities of languages as well) and polyphony of his postcolonial translations give his texts much of their evocative appeal and subversive power. In a subversive reversal of trend where English provides the source text, Chaudhuri's transcreative acts on the printed page are a successful domestication of English into the Chaudhuri-translating self's own culture.

The process of translation involved in making another culture comprehensible entails varying degrees of violence, especially when the culture being translated is constituted as that of the 'other'. Chaudhuri does this not by yoking two dissimilar tropes by violence as it were, but by effecting an ethnolinguistic model where *assemblages* of different tropes on one page – the visual, the auditory and the literary- create coherence. So if having heteroglossic difference in their various situatedness on the printed page is Chaudhuri's method of de-ossifying the cultural codes of his texts(s), then the two ways in which this is effected are 'renewal' where the code is recoded ('Only one place was referred to as there these days; but at one time it used to be the Admiral's in-law's home'. *A New World,* 92) and 'diffusion' where the code not only gets activated but also spreads beyond

its earlier boundaries (' It was Lord Vishwakarma who looked after this company and the cranes that it made'. *Freedom Song*, 135).

Using an intertwined and interstitched language ("The text made unexpected revelations in a deadpan way: 'Muktabayusana: This is good for the digestion. Those who do this daily will not suffer from gas or stomach problems." *Freedom Song*, 58) is not just another clichéd way of writing back to the Empire. 'A proper shraddh ceremony' (*Real Time*, 63) is the only proper way to convey an indigenous experience. Certainly not a 'literary by-product', as Ojo calls this brand of literature,[60] the linguistic fluidity Chaudhuri's texts contain effectively effaces the traditional distinction between source and target languages. In doing so, it also effaces another clichéd problematic of identity politics: Who is Chaudhuri, the Indian writer of English fiction writing for? Tired of addressing questions on the locus of their intended readership put to the Indian writer in English, Chaudhuri's act of translation 'becomes' his answer to these critics for the 'new language' of his texts, with its hybridity resulting from the interpenetration of several linguistic varieties, no longer belongs to any one language per se ("Do I have that? You know that next year is your "final" year. The year of the 'final' –it had been waiting for him, it seemed, like a mythical mountain, always there, but coming nearer and nearer; and now it was in sight". *Freedom Song*, 91). Even when the dominant language is English, Benglish (Bengali and English) supplies the subterranean tropes in which the Bengali experience is communicated ('Future 'and 'career' had become Bengali words, incorporated unconsciously but feverishly into daily Bengali parlance. *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 19). This interdialectal experience is one of the many ways in which Chaudhuri's translative process operates (Khuku's personal deity, which she might have created herself, or which had possibly been created by her mother, was one she called Bipad Nashini, or Destroyer of Distress. *Freedom Song*, 55).

Translation can do everything except mark this linguistic difference inscribed in the language, this difference of language systems inscribed in a single tongue. At best, it can

[60] S. Ade Ojo, 'The Role of the Translator of African Literature in Inter-cultural Consciousness and Relationship', *Meta* Vol. 37,no. 3, 1986, 295.

get everything across except this: the fact that there are, in one linguistic system, perhaps several language or tongues.[61]

One needs to recruit greater attention to Chaudhuri's interdialectal layering.

Then looking at Vikram she smiled, widening her mouth, so that her teeth showed, and said: 'Esho shona', and then, remembering he might want her to speak in Engish, 'Come to thamma'. (*A New World*, 6)

Note the 'Esho shona' followed by 'come to thamma': 'Esho shona'can be literally translated into 'Come here, dear' but Chaudhuri's use of 'Come to thamma' ('Come to grandma', another hybrid utterance, gives evidence of how his translative process operates. Progressively each sentence distinguishes itself more like the other: while 'Esho shona' is very different from 'Come to thamma' linguistically, yet the spirit of the enonces is similar. Chaudhuri sets one version against the other (the Bengali idiom of 'Esho shona' against the English 'Come to thamma') to represent a specific set of social, cultural and situational values.

The nerve center of any utterance, of any expression, is not interior but exterior: it is situated in the social milieu surrounding the individual.[62]

An attempt to translate the literal version of the sentence in the conventional sense ('Come dear', for example) would not reproduce these separate values because they exist by virtue of their place with the continuum, not as independent linguistic varieties. The translational process also works itself out as a form of *transaction*, as an interactive, dialogic, two-way process involving complex negotiation and exchange:[63]

---

[61] Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination, Monolingualism of the Other: or the Prosthesis of Origin* (Stanford University Press, 1998), 100.

[62] See Valentin N.Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language (*New York: Seminar Press, 1973), 173.

[63] See Harish Trivedi, *Colonial Transactions* (Calcutta: Papyrus, 1993).

'Pranam karo, Bonny', he said. The boy...turned to walk...towards his grandfather, to touch his feet' (*A New World*, 7).

Like Monika Verma,[64] Chaudhuri uses 'the idiom understood by the English-speaking person' 'to interpret the idiom of Bengali thought'. But information transfer and literalism make strange bedfellows, as in this:

'Of course, baba', she said rising. 'I'll bring it right now'.
This made him remember that his father had never called him 'baba' as many Bengali fathers do their sons –the age-old, loving, inexplicable practice of fathers calling their sons 'father' but always Jayojit, and nothing else. (*A New World*, 25)

The word 'inexplicable' perhaps explains Chaudhuri's problem of translation. If the source and its translation are close, then information transfer becomes easy ('my nani, my mother's mother', *Real Time*, 74) but if the sign cannot function as a raw transfer of data ('the conversation- the 'adda' *Freedom Song*, 13), then the translation's sign often looks emaciated.

Is the word 'pichwai' really untranslatable? Translation theorists argue that if Bronsilaw Zielenski, the prize winning translator of Melville's *Moby Dick*, could create new words in his translation simply because there was no whaling vocabulary in Polish, then any and every word should have a translated equivalent. Yet Chaudhuri cannot be faulted for leaving many Bengali words untranslated:

"He has been playing with his Jurassic Park rakkhosh", said the boy's grandmother. (*A New World*, 25).

The word 'rakkhosh' loses its mythic essence of awe that attaches to the Bengali child's storyhood when translated into a plain English 'demon'. Jacques Derrida discusses the polysemic word 'pharmakon' with its meanings of 'poison' and 'remedy', to show not only how words are untranslatable between languages but that, as Barbara Johnson points

[64] See Sujit Mukherjee, *Translation as Discovery* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1994), 91.

out in her translation of Derrida's critical theology, 'the original text is always an impossible translation...that renders translation impossible'.[65] The translations of 'gopi', 'luchi' (*A New World*, 39; 40), 'the Bengali weakness for "bhraman"' (*A New World*, 10) would only result in entropy of meaning. To translate is to convert difference into similarity.

'Kato?' The Bengali word for 'How much' seemed out of place, too tentative and non-committal. ....'Dui taka'- two rupees. (*A New World*, 56).

But Chaudhuri juxtaposes difference with similarity where the untranslated placed adjacent to the translated have just the opposite meanings:

'Jaldi, jaldi'. Impatience. (*A New World*, 58).

Mistakes, when 'translated' need not always be brutal. There is no 'month of Hemanta' in the Bengali calendar (*A New World*, 89). 'Hemanta'is the Bengali autumn, a season, and not a month. But this transcreation, possibly for poetic effect, like Keats misreading and then writing on the Chapman-translated Homer, does not take away from the beauty of the linguistic structure.

Petty language crimes...cause little semantic and aesthetic damage.[66]

The longish drawl of 'He-man-ta' only adds to the 'pleasantness' mentioned earlier in the sentence.

For Chaudhuri, then, translation becomes a form for postmodernity, implying as it does a logic based on *combination* rather than on *exclusion*: 'both-and' ('wife' and 'grihini' in 'the wife, affectionately referred to as the 'grihini' *Real Time*, 105) rather than 'either-or',

---

[65] Willis Barnstone, *The Poetics of Translation: History, Theory, Practice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 42.
[66] Ibid., 123.

allowing different strands to become interwoven ('Whenever I thought of a Supreme deity, which was not often but not altogether infrequently, either it was God I thought of, rather than 'parameshwar' or 'ishwar' *Real Time*, 72) – Supreme Deity, God, 'parameshwar'.'ishear') without the obligation of deciding for one and against another. This othering of the same (God-parameshwar),a deferring of identity through difference ('whose last film , Jaadu- "Magic" *Real Time*, 53) is Chaudhuri's method of handling cultural transference.

Moving beyond formalist approaches to translation, Chaudhuri often takes a middle stance between the notion of dynamic/ functional equivalence ("At first, she'd called him "Masterji"...as she had all her former teachers. There was no formal, ceremonial seal on the relationship as there is between guru and shishya; he was there to do his job, to be a teacher, and she to learn" *Real Time*, 127) or the interpretative definition of meaning (the word 'saala' interpreted in the glossary in Real Time). The invocation of 'David Davidar' ('Whom does one write for? At least one of the answers will have to be – "David Davidar" *Real Time*, 73) becomes an effort at 'horizontal interpenetrative' translation where the coded cultural register of Davidar (as editor of Penguin Books India) mixes with the personal English register of the aspiring autobiographer in such a way that the lines demarcating them as separate entities are blurred. "A glass of thanda paani" (*Real Time*, 125) is also Chaudhuri's politics of dissolving hierarchies of language. And if Chaudhuri ever lapses into 'vertical interpenetrative' translation, he makes sure that in the coexistence of different varieties in a hierarchy ("Saala!" said Yusuf...."Don't abuse your brother-in-law", said Khatau. *Real Time*, 56), it is always the source culture that is privileged- the composite poly-connotative 'saala' over the flat-Englished 'brother-in-law' *Real Time*, 56); 'Baishnab Padabali', 'Chandidas and bidyapati' *Real Time*, 8) over not only the English 'Eliot' (*Real Time*, 6) and the Englishised 'Tagore' (rather than 'Thakur'. *Real Time*, 8) but more importantly, over the literary English register which fails to provide an equivalent for 'biraha' (*Real time*, 8). These varieties –horizontal and vertical interpenetration- which individually (Boycott's "Eendiuns", "doostorm", *Real Time,* 55, 56) or in combination ("That's Hanuman, the monkey god", said Jayojit, ..."You mean, like, he's the god of the monkeys?" "Well, yes, but let's say that he's a

god who also happens to be a monkey", said Jayojit. *A New World*, 188), fulfil different social or cultural usages and coexist and operate as a single system to convey 'Bengaliness'. Chaudhuri's translation of Bengaliness therefore proves that the oft-questioned case of 'originality' is in no way dependent on anteriority when one is dealing with cultural transference.

Translation is a cognitive 'operator', a mechanism which provides access to the social worldview in a double sense:

'Kitna din lagega khatam hone ko?' As if he was planning to buy a flat here. 'Saal lag jayega, saab', the watchman.a whole year for completion. (*A New World*, 150)

Not only has Chaudhuri to 'interpret' the 'original' text of life reasonably, he also 'has to restructure his interpretation in *another language* while striving to approximate the original structure'.[67] Chaudhuri also resorts to paraphrasing in order to communicate a cultural essence for 'translation is the sign of an intellectual heritage, the basis for commentary and continuation'.[68]

Some of the pictures she had bought –prints; pichwais with serene trains of elephants, the cowherd-god, dallying with the gopis, identified by the peacock-plume above the forehead –were still on the walls (*A New World*, 39).

The emphasis here is not on translating in a language appropriate for a target audience but on translating an amorphous code of cultural differentials while retaining a supposedly 'unifying' language of communication.

At a very different end of the spectrum of translation, we find Chaudhuri performing a linguistic act that defies categorization

---

[67] Sujit Mukherjee, *Translation as Discovery* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1994), 139.
[68] See Sherry Simon, 'A Single Brushstroke Writing Through Translation: Anne Carson' *Journal of Contemporary Thought*, 15 (Summer 2002), 49.

'Ddash oh do yoo ayi goo', she said.
'What?' said Bhaskar....
Returning, she repeated:
'That won't do you any good' (*Freedom Song*, 6)

By performing a literary irony on interlingual writing, Chaudhuri translates a verbal act by going back to the classic dictum of 'faithfulness' to the 'source text', in the process revealing a tongue-in-cheek (almost literally) humour.

Chaudhuri's sensibility is translational, and his work is an illustration of the way in which translation can nourish the writing process, infusing the present with the sensitivities of another time (*Afternoon Raag*, 89). His aim as a translator is neither ethnographic nor philogical: yet,

Speaking an English that is hardly spoken in any other part of the world anymore, with queer proverbs and turns, dropped consonants and vowels, turning the language like meat inside their mouths, (*Afternoon Raag*, 93)

becomes an example of how he uses both for the 'social' translative act.

By 'translating' Lawrence's poem ("Ship of Death") through the filter of the narrator's psyche to produce the *metaphors* of food ('fried pithhas' , *Afternoon Raag*, 132-33), Chaudhuri creates breaks on the surface of the 'original' Lawrence text, gaps that are filled up by the 'transferred' metaphors of the narrator's cultural text. 'Metaphorein', we must remember, is one of the Greek words for translation. Chaudhuri, in the process, is also entering into a 'dialogue' with an 'influencing text', thereby going back to the tradition of Anandavardhana who refers to 'sambada' or 'dialogue' as the concept of translation in his *Dhvanyaloka*.

Among the two approaches to translation, 'the conservative and the additive...may also be called the mediatory and the creative',[69] Chaudhuri here chooses to use the latter in his unique way .

Like most Bengalis, she pronounces 'hurt' as 'heart', and 'ship' asa 'sheep', for she belongs to a culture with a more spacious concept of time, which deliberately allows one to naively and clearly expand the vowels; and yet her speech is dotted with English proverbs, and delicate, unIndian constructions like, 'It's a nice day, isn't it? where most Indians would say, straightforwardly, 'It's a nice day, no?' Many of her sentences are plain translations from Bengali, and have a lovable homely melody, while a few retain their English inflections, and are sweet and foreign as the sound of whistling. (*Afternoon Raag*, 58)

By 'translating' the mother's verbal 'translation' with an 'explanatory note' (by commenting on the 'spacious concept of time' of the period), Chaudhuri is overwriting the source-text of his mother and disavowing in a way, the unilaterality of its controlling presence. At other places on the page, he does quite the opposite: instead of reproducing the overlapped impure language of Elizabeth mami (Elizabeth mami, that splendid and good-hearted lady, spoke to her neighbour, whoever it happened to be, in a strange, staccato version of Bengali....Whenever she tried to speak the Bengali language, her Yorkshire tongue rebelled and made a crazy attempt at liberation; to say her pronunciations were wrong would be to miss the point; they were innocent, confused, and beyond the parlance of human society, like the song of a bird. *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 198) and making another clichéd postcolonial statement, Chaudhuri translates an 'absent' language (the Bengali language in Yorkshire tongue) to portray a cultural collage that is, in many ways, the reverse of the overdone colonized-in-coloniser's-tongue cliché. By comparing her language with the 'song of a bird', Chaudhuri, beautifully, yet craftily, shows the impossibility of translating certain tropes.

In translating the dhobi or cleaners as 'istriwalla, or The Man Who Owns An Iron' (*A Strange and Sublime address*, 142), Chaudhuri resorts to Derridean syllepsis, 'the trope

[69] Sukanta Chaudhuri, 'Translation and Displacement: The Life and Works of Pierre Menard', *Journal of Contemporary Thought*, 15 (Summer 2002), 43.

that consists in understanding the same word in two different ways at the same time, one meaning being literal or primary, the other figurative'.[70] After having made a choice from different possible contextual meanings, he realizes that the syntactic structure of his translated sentence which is almost equivalent to a dictionary entry, has resulted in a cultural ambiguity where the 'walla' as possessor in the Hindi language translated into 'who owns' or 'owner' fails to communicate the irony of the name of his profession. This resultant humour, created by the gap between 'walla' and 'who owns', that only a polylingual reader can relish, is the most important and delightful by-product of the translator's enterprise.

In Chaudhuri's translated world, the untranslatability of the Indian 'ma' leads to an intertextual structure where the signifier 'ma' is critiqued through the process of deconstruction.

'Ma', she said, for she called my mother 'ma'as I did, 'what happened here?' (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 138).

Through the amphibious act of (un)translating 'ma', Chaudhuri draws out from within the word something other than itself, other than its recognized being (the 'ma' for the servant is the 'ma' as the lady of the house); yet something also within itself, something that it indeed *is* (the 'ma'as mother for the son). This 'repetition without identity' (the two 'mas' being dissimilar)[71] which Derrida sees as a 'structure of the double mark' is in, many ways, Chaudhuri's tool to bring out the irony through his translative process by deconstructing 'saala' with 'brother-in-law' (*Real Time*, 56) and then commenting on the slippage of meaning in the glossary – an extension beyond the printed page- Chaudhuri only confirms the Derridean 'one mark inside and the other outside the deconstructive system'.[72] The mark inside is the brother-in-law *in* the story /text (Real time p. 56); the mark outside is the intended abuse in the glossary: the Derridean 'double reading and a double writing' (ibid).

---

[70] Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 629.
[71] See Jacques Derrida, *Positions* trans. Alan Bass (University of Chicago Press, 1981), 4.
[72] Ibid.

The act of translation does not just bridge a gap between two different cultures, but becomes a strategy of intervention through which newness comes into the world, where cultures are remixed. This newness results from the fact that what is being 'othered' in the process of translation is a shifting paradigm. Chaudhuri writes this of Saraswati with the wrinkled clothes in her arms- 'she looked like Mother Teresa carrying the light, wispy bodies of dying children' (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 72). It is not just the subaltern servant Saraswati (Saraswati, significantly, is the Hindu goddess of learning) being 'translated' for a 'supposed' Western reader out there somewhere; it is also the cult figure of Mother Teresa being translated in 'both' directions.

One trope that Chaudhuri employs to talk of translation is the mirror: Sandeep 'wished he could live in the mirror...the jokes and rhymes in his mother tongue upon his lips' (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 87). The mirror, with its image of alterity, acts as a medium of translation, and Chaudhuri beautifully welds the desire to live in the mirror with the desire for the mother tongue, both acts of translation. This *ambiguous* desire to be 'translated' (a desire for the mother tongue in spite of aspiring to be a writer in English) comes across in the translated untranslatability of Chhordimoni's expletives.

The air rang out with expletives, intense names as untranslatable as poetry: 'Duffer! Crowface! Retarded child! She-goat! Cow-eyeed imbecile!'....'O genius! O wonderworker! O helpless child!' (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 88).

Chaudhuri, in 'translating' what he terms as 'untranslatable as poetry', constructs a deconstructive binary by highlighting the *trace* of the invisible original Bengali expletives in the text. By thus showing up the 'need' for the 'original' through its translated existence, the decontextualised expletives – for like jokes expletives too are culture specific - expose an unfulfilled promise, and Chaudhuri's mastery lies in ripping open this space that rejects a formalism for a more inclusive cultural paradigm. Similarly, Panna, by 'translating' a 'swimming pool' into a 'lake' (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 141), is accommodating fracture and slippage in the trajectory of his dissemination.

Korporashen water is not good, Saab (*A Strange and sublime Address*, 141).

Panna's translation of 'corporation' into 'korporashen' involves not only a radical shift of lingual context, but more importantly a concomitant shift of social and epistemic mores. The same is true of English in the Bangla accent.

When the English lessons began, the voice became stentorian and English sentences and words exploded like little bombs in the air.
Whut ees thee name of thee boy?

- Thee name of the boy ees John.
- Whut deed John habhfor deenar?
- John had meelk and bredfor deenar.
- Why deed John habh meelk and bredfor deenar? (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 101)

This translation is a commentary and criticism, an indictment not only against the heavily accented English, but, more importantly, about the lack of translation of basic English textbooks. An school going Bengali boy studying in a Bangla-medium school is most unlikely to have bread or acquaintance by the name of John or have milk and bread for dinner. This also gives evidence of Chaudhuri's uniquely conditioned response as reader and then recorder in translating a text. Then, by literally translating Saraswati's exclamations on her illness ('Hai hai! O misery!' she exclaimed. *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 83), Chaudhuri explores the amphibious, cross-modal life of texts where the words 'O misery' after 'Hai hai!' give the flavour not only of an overlapping language discourse but also of two varies topoi. This flavour is also present in an apparently innocent sentence like

A little before sunset, a woman called Chhaya came to clean the house a second time... (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 9).

By positing the word 'chhaya' (meaning 'shadow') after sunset, Chaudhuri achieves a poetic grace in a mutative inter-lingual transfer of information that borders between the denotative and connotative meanings.

Faced with the problem of untranslatibility in cultural transference, Chaudhuri creates a hetero*graphic* text, a text that goes beyond the printed black alphabets on the white space. Chaudhuri's translational semiotic is, therefore, in many ways, the *optic*, and it is in the opticalisation of the printed page that Chaudhuri's unique contribution to the Indian novel lies.

The significance of the optic, the untranslated 'sandesh' (reproduced in Bangla; *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 94) needs special review. The neo-neoclassical 'imitated-as-translated' 'sandesh' releases an unknown and unrecognized linguistic cognate in a spatial and temporal limbo. This liberation of the subverted Bengali language in the 'English' hybrid text (an oxymoron by itself) leaves it ('sandesh' as Bangla) free to acquire new value through new sited and associations. The 'sandesh' becomes an adaptive verbal strategy.

Despite the existence of interpenetrative linguistic systems (*Freedom Song,* 174) and the fact that there is no single homogeneous language, translation theorists continue to involve themselves in arguments over faithfulness and meaning which themselves depend on conceptions of target and source languages as clearly demarcated systems. Chaudhuri does away with this concept of a language as a closed homogeneous system by introducing codes into his language system which belong to both languages and yet to neither.

DUNKEL, IMF (*Freedom Song,* 163).

Through this sleight of the pen, Chaudhuri does away with the politics of opposing dynamics involved in the act of translating – *change* on the one hand, and *constancy* on the other. By 'reproducing' DUNKEL and IMF and Gatt *ad verbatim*, Chaudhuri is doing

neither- nor *changing* these terms for the 'othered' reader's comprehension nor forcing himself to adhere to any form of *constancy* or 'faithfulness', for these codes, by remaining 'untranslated' in his language system, convey succinctly the effects of liberalization on the Marxist(ised) Bengali's psyche.

Chaudhuri in translating the 'kaw' and 'khaw' (*Freedom Song*, 98) in terms of the English alphabet succumbs to the typical retribalization versus globalization debate that translation politics inevitably brings in its wake, the one re-creating ancient sub national and ethnic borders from within, the other making national borders porous from without. This process of translating the units of a regional language in terms of the global(ised) language is at one and the same time erasing, and valorizing the local and regional. It is also the Youngian 'vocabulary of one language superimposed on the grammar of another'.[73]

Transcoding strategies ensure that the literary is translated into the visual –

Oranges, white batasha, cucumbers (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 37)

translates into the visual semiotic of saffron, white, green, the Indian flag. A similar visual coding is also evident in

He'd also bought a sari for his mother. It was a pretty sari, an off-white tangail with orange embroidery upon it, and a green border (*A New World*, 166).

The symbolic capital that this translative utterance produces is thus a correlate of a set of socio-historical values, here a nationalistic narrative. On some occasions, Chaudhuri does something exactly the opposite on the printed page: he semanticises the optic as in the description of the Laxman cartoon (*Afternoon Raag*, 56-57) or the wedding card in *Freedom Song* (31-32) or the photographs in *Freedom Song* (77) or the wall graffiti (*Freedom Song*, 98).

[73] See Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Culture, Theory and Race* (London: New York: Routledge, 1995), 5.

The word 'translation' etymologically means 'carried from one place to another', transported across the borders between one language and another, one culture and another.

...the voice of the Australian commentator would come through, loud and urgent one moment, weak and distant the other, as if a few words were being carried off, on their passage towards India, by a cormorant crossing the ocean (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 73-74).

The voice of the Australian commentator is 'translated' across the ocean through the mechanism of the outdated radio- the 'original' voice of the commentator, his words, are translated, with elisions and omissions and transmutations, and 'on their passage towards India', the originating spirit' of the words get lost. The dissemination of the text is an endless series of trans-lationes, carryings across- transpositions in more senses than one: an overall change of site or context, but also a reconstitution of the elements. Hence the text a reader reads is not the text that the author wrote, nor that read by any other reader.

Larson refers to translation as a 'mutual undoing of each language into the other....you can't capture, you can't bring things equally...'.[74] Chaudhuri escapes in some way from this trap of untranslatibility by means of onomatopoeic reproduction:

The kokil's cry – "ku-wu
Ku-wu
Ku-wu" (*A Strange and Sublime Address,* 128)

"the cheap pink glass bangles around her wrist said softly: chuk-a-chuk-a-chuk-a-chuk" (*A Strange and Sublime Address,* 138);

"sometimes there was that repetitive engaged signal – poo, poo, poo, poo, like a horn blowing in a traffic jam" (*A Strange and Sublime Address,* 201);

[74] See Mildred L. Larson, *Meaning-Based Translation* (Dallas: Ethnologue, 1998), 15.

"a tapping noise began, tap, tap, tap, tick, tick, tap" (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 201).

Like emotions, these sounds are untranslatable into words.

Culture specific myths are re-cast in a new language of the eye. By emplotting the Lakshmi footprint on the English worded page, Chaudhuri breaks the aporia of verbal usage and the restricted lines of transmission of the black Roman alphabet on the white page (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 106). Reading this as a juxtaposed text with Saraswati's wet footprints (*A Strange and Sublime Address,* 75) only reveals to us Chaudhuri's masterstroke in effecting this readerly juxtaposition between two untranslatable idioms in this 'footprint' language game. The use of the trope of the 'footprint' is not a simplistic tool to shock the reader's eye: its function is more double-edged. The savage's footprint in Defoe and the servant's in Chaudhuri, though 'rich with possibility', are 'wet', and therefore, ephemeral. These are the footprints of the subaltern who are disallowed from leaving behind their footprints on the text of history, not even as a footnote. So Chaudhuri makes no effort to trace the patterns of their footprints on the printed page. Unlike this, the Lakshmi footprint is 'painted on the floor'. Chaudhuri's method of dealing with the politics of this *difference* is to encode the subaltern's footprint in terms of words on the printed page while 'painting' the Lakshmi footprint on the white page that becomes almost analogous to the floor, and in an ironic reversal of the optic, instead of the white rice paste on a dark floor, the Lakshmi footprint on the printed page is encrypted between lines. Chaudhuri's creation of such polysemic texts becomes an interesting tool in translating culture for an (alien) reader.

Kapil Kapoor locates a shift in translation paradigms from 'transferring the concept' to 'transferring the term with the concept'.[75] Chaudhuri does exactly this when *opticalising* billboards or signboards (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 49, 65; *Afternoon Raag*, 27; *Freedom Song,* 11). In talking about the politics of representation of the printed page in the fictional works of Amit Chaudhuri, I shall also talk about the use of the Bengali alphabet (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 81), the use of capital letters, lack of chapter

[75] See Shantha Ramakrishna, ed. *Translation and Multilingualism* (Delhi: Pencraft, 1997), 146-56.

names and numbers, and the covers of his books to show how his acts of *rupantar* ('change in form') and *anuvad* ('speaking after' or 'following') acknowledge difference, and celebrate it. In doing so, he leaves the blank space of the page *optically* 'different' from what it was, richer than what it was, and more powerful than what the printed page ever has been; to put it more simply, the printed page of his texts is *a new world* in the tradition of the *pages* of the Indian English novel.

Chapter 3

The Metonymised Body: Exploring the Semiotic of the Body

'To semiotize is (first) to segmentize'.[76]

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'.[77] 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

[76] Francis Edeline in Goran Sonesson: www.arthist.lu.se)
[77] 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'.[78]

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.[79] This paper shows Chaudhuri performing a Barthean operation on the body in which it 'is torn and ripped apart . . . reassembled into a total body'.[80]

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 familiality:

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

---

[78] Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Hill & Wang, 1975), 67-68.

[79] 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.

[80] 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.[81]

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:

[81] 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 psychical identity?[82] 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  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'.[83] 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-

[82] 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.
[83] 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 catechrization (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 pleasured 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 cenecthesia 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.[84] 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':[85]

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 –

[84] See Jean Starobinski & John A. Gallucci, 'The Body's Moment', *Yale French Studies*. 64, 1983, 273-305.
[85] 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)[86]

- 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') –

[86] 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' 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, uctous thing (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 69).

In Chaudhuri's optic universe, the metaphorics 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'.[87] (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.

---

[87] 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, uncleanliness,. . . 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'.[88] 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

[88] 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'.[89]

[89] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*. (London: The Athlone Press, 1996), 208.

Salt, Sugar, Spice: The Food Dis(h)-course

Jeno bashonar shera basa rashonay[90]

(which can be translated as, 'Know that the home for the most fragrant is in cooking'.)

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 middleclass Bengal or India which I wanted to capture in *A Strange and Sublime Address*.[91]

The epistemic potentiality of food has its receptionist richness but curiously it has not been much explored as a paradigmatic correspondence in Indian English fiction. Working on this malnourished zone concerning the hermeneutics of food in its relation to Amit Chaudhuri's oeuvre, one finds in its consequent interpretability, a socio-cultural semiotic. Chaudhuri, while staying in the realist tradition, marinates his writing with ingredients from 'different' traditions of food history, to cook up a delicious postcolonial text that is flavoured with the concept of food as metaphor, a social qualisign, an economic index, an imprint of individuality (*Afternoon Raag*, 82); Freedom *Song*, 138), and even, in quite a metaphysical vein, with food that is not food ('You mean you eat this?', they'd say. *A New World,* 54; *Freedom Song*, 13). In this chapter, I intend to explore how the food

[90] See Samir Dasgupta, *Shukhadyer Sandhane* (Kolkata: Subarnarekha. 2001), 34.

[91] See Sumana R. Ghosh, "Aalap: In conversation with Amit Chaudhuri" in *The Novels of Amit Chaudhuri: An Exploration in the Alternative Tradition* eds. Anu Shukla and S. B. Shukla (Delhi: Swarup and Sons, 2004).

dis(h)-course in Amit Chaudhuri's novels, while communicating Bengaliness and, to a certain extent, Indianness, offers significant pointers to the current problems of postcolonial politics. Rather than using food tropes which remain circumscribed within the coloniser-colonised bind, Chaudhuri's work pokes its grilling irons into the politics of postcoloniality which haunt postcolonised societies. The ingredients of Chaudhuri's dish are not the Englands and Americas but little Indias; the recipe that he adopts is to create translational semiotics between little cultures, the lady's with the lackey's, the master's voice with the subaltern's song; and yet the platter in which this dish is served – the language- is the globalised English. What I intend to demonstrate (quite in the manner of a chef!) is to locate the food tropes that Chaudhuri uses in the postcolonised kitchen that gives birth to them, in other words, link, in some ways, Chaudhuri's postcolonised discourse on food with the tradition of food writing in Bengal. In doing so, I try to 'appropriate' Chaudhuri's writing for my own end to show that 'postcolonial food' cannot be an imaginary construct created out of a social and cultural vacuum; rather (t)his culinary aesthetic has its seeds in the kitchen garden of the literature of Bengal, and Chaudhuri's writing is an exploration in this alternative tradition of how an Indian English-Bengali writer (I use the hyphen consciously) uses both traditions (the coloniser's discourse to talk of the colonised's dish) to post-colonise food (I use the hyphen consciously once again).

Chaudhuri constructs a unique discourse on rice, the ultimate semiotic of Bengaliness. Like the rice on the plate around which curries, fish, meat and desserts arrange themselves, Chaudhuri's sememes on rice is the centre around which other culinary tropes configurate. He shows how central rice is to attain a Bengali element of completeness ('Anna' means 'rice' or 'food', and 'purna' means 'full' or 'complete', *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 68). Chaudhuri's text becomes, as it were, an extension of the medieval Bengali text, the *Shunya Purana*, which extols the virtues of the fifty kinds of rice then grown in Bengal. Rice and the manner of eating it, in Chaudhuri's semiosphere, become indicators of social difference. Reading two passages juxtaposed together would make my point clear.

My father, the most serious person at the table, uses, unexpectedly, a fork and a spoon to eat. He cannot begin till he has been served, and till that moment, remains sombre and paralysed. Once started, he floods his plate with daal, till it has made a yellow lake with white hillocks of rice upon its banks (*Afternoon Raag*, 46).

Then she (Haridasi) sat in one corner of the kitchen, the only one awake in the house, a guest, a stranger, a friend, and ate from a plate with a heap of rice and a puddle of dal and vegetables on one side. . . . Without being aware of it, she tried to mix the puddle of dal uniformly with the huge quantity of rice. She loved rice (*Freedom Song*, 29)

Note the different registers of rhetoric used : the raised 'hillock' on the father's plate versus the razed 'puddle' on Haridasi's plate; the father's use of spoon versus Haridasi's efforts at 'uniform mixing'. The love of rice ('She loved rice' has a flavour of condescension) is quite East Bengali, bangal to be precise. The love of rice is often used by the culturally snooty ghoti to satirise the rice-loving bangal, here represented through the cultural, financial, and social subaltern, the servant Haridasi. Rice is not only the paramanna, but its flour is used for alpana, drawing motifs or Lakshmi footprints on festive occasions.

Rice also appears in a different guise, a different preparation and a pre-fix, as 'puffed rice', muri. As muri, it takes on socially recognizable contours. Spicy puffed rice (the ubiquitous pan-Indian jhal muri), with its share of the rich-man-at-leisure's tongue-tasty ingredients is very different from the servant Saraswati's preparation of puffed rice soaked in water (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 83-84), a bangal cure for almost every illness under the sun. Like its locus of origin –East Bengal- and its associated naivete and ignorance in the ghoti's eyes, Saraswati's disease and its cure of soaked muri, too, is a malady rooted as much in its ignorance of cause and symptom as it is of the feverish body.

Chaudhuri's invocation of mustard oil as a pickling agent, for sunning 'both tamarind and babies' is a continuation of the Bengali tradition, from the *Charaka Samhita* written in

AD 1060 by Chakrapani Datta, through *Khanar Vachana* , a Bengali work of the eleventh century which recommends free use of mustard oil in Magh, a cold month to the *Sushrutha Samhita* which recommends the use of mustard oil for body massage prior to taking a bath.[92] The malleability of mustard oil, therefore, for pickling and preservation, moisturising and tanning children's bodies, for frying and cooking, is also noticed in a totally unlikely activity, in killing an insect in the alien space of the ear.

Saraswati heated a bowl of oil, Mamima dipped her little finger in it, and holding it an inch away from the earhole, let a drop of oil fall into the dark tunnel (*A Strange and Sublime Address,* 2).

This, however, is not only an evidence of Chaudhuri's faithfulness in recording the Bangla life-scape, but an adept combination of two epistemes of food history: the use of red mustard seeds to subdue evil spirits;[93] and the word 'abhaya', meaning fear-inspiring, used for mustard seeds in the *Atharvaveda.*[94] Not just content with this, Chaudhuri invokes the tradition of writing about the unique pungent flavour of mustard oil. Just as Mukundram Chakravarti, in the *Chandimangala* (16th c) writes about the tamasic nature of Lord Shiva reflected in the fact that his food is cooked not in ghee, which is a luminous sattvika product, but in pungent mustard oil,[95] similarly, Chaudhuri's writing about Chhotomama's fascination for the jaam-mixture, spiced with mustard oil, is an indicator of the uncle's tamasic, easily excitable nature.

This 'jaam' mixture (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 23-24) also becomes a social trope for communality and familiality; unlike the world of an urbanised biscuity Bombay ('Meanwhile, biscuits / dominated our shelves', *Real Time*, 157. The use of biscuit as a trope of 'otherness', of a culture that is 'foreign' to an indigenous Bengaliness is part of a long and rich tradition, as evident in this chora or child rhyme: "All right very good/ Pauroti biscuit/ Mem khai kut kut/ Saheb bole very good" which means 'All right very good/ Bread and biscuit/ The mensahib nibbles at the biscuit/ The sahib says very good' *Tapur Tupur*, 4.), Sandeep finds in his uncle's house in Calcutta, an opportunity to be a

---

[92] D.C. Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature* (University of Calcutta, 1911), 1-24.
[93] Margaret Stutley, *Ancient Indian Magic and Folklore* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 58.
[94] Om Prakash, *Food and Drinks in Ancient India* (Delhi : Munshiram Manoharlal, 1961), 7-33.
[95] France Bhattacharya, 'Food Rituals in the Chandimangala', trans. Radha Sharma, *India International Centre Quarterly*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1985, 169.

part of a 'food chain', where everyone contributes to the democratizing process of shaking the jaam-filled pan with clenched teeth to render it 'soft and moist and pulpy, purplish in colour, both sweet and tangy, delicious' (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 23-24). While Chaudhuri is, in a way, making an effort to reduce the very Bengali cuisine of makha (mashed) and bata (ground)[96] into English words, he is, also, by using the word 'jaam' instead of an English synonym, trying to define a social semiotic of Bengaliness. Such is the Bengali's fondness for this fruit that he has made the moyra (the sweetmeat maker) create a simulation in the sweet delicacy kalo-jaam or gulab jamun, purplish brown in colour and served in sugar syrup.

And how could one leave out the mishti (sweets) from the narrative on Bengali food? If K.T. Achaya has a separate entry for Bengali sweets (next to the one on Bengali food) in his *A Historical Dictionary of Indian Food*, Chaudhuri constructs a counter-discourse to his discourse on home-cooked food. Apart from the mother-made pittha (*Afternoon Raag*, 133), all sweets are bought.

> So numerous are professional sweet-meat makers, and so varied and so excellent are their products, that households prefer to buy them, making at home only the simpler payesh and pithe, desserts that derive from milk and thickened milk, rice, rava, coconut, and sugar or palm jaggery.[97]

Quite significantly, sweets become markers, not of taste or affection, but of social position for Chaudhuri's semiotic of sweetmeats is always closely allied with the optic of the printed name of the sweet parlour it has been b-r-ought from. For the middle class relatives living far away from Calcutta, 'Ganguram' is a name that evokes not only the taste of a desired-but-denied delicacy, but also a fantasy-discourse, only within reach of their rich relatives ('It was nothing, of course, only Ganguram's sweets and yoghurts, but they fussed and fussed and created the illusion that it was something, something unique

[96] Kiran Lekha Roy, *Barendra Randhan* (Calcutta: Subarnekha, 2000), 13-21.
[97] K.T. Achaya, *A Historical Dictionary of Indian Food* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 23.

and untasted and unencountered' *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 66). (The cost of food as a designator for social status also comes across in *Freedom Song*, 23).

Sandeep taking a sandesh from Satyanarayan for Chhotomama in his hospital chamber (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 118), with the optical discourse of sandesh in big black Bangla filling the page, is a way of 'showing' readers how sweets, especially the sandesh (significantly, a Portuguese contribution), its offering as prasad, or a tasty health supplement ('Doctors give them to their patients', *A New World*, 185), is a part of the Bengali's culinary psyche. This becomes evident also in Jayojit's mother insisting on his taking the box of sweets she has got him (*A New World*, 184-85). Jayojit, while talking about the possible reaction of the custom officials at the JFK airport, is making an indication of the 'foreignness' of this food in their eyes. The point I am trying to make is not just about cultural, and therefore, culinary difference, but on the stress on 'foreignness' of food. This trope of foreignness operates in a different manner elsewhere. Chaudhuri's culinary affair with otherness does not extend beyond the Chinese concoctions of chowmien, chicken manchurian, chilli sauce and the Parsi dhansak. The Rajasthani cuisine of the guru (*Afternoon Raag*, 112) is represented in a language that is far from appetizing. Note the Bengali Mr (and Mrs) Chatterjee's reaction to the Rajasthani wife's preparation of ladoo ('This'll give me indigestion', he said. *Real Time*, 142), at least more lovingly prepared and packed than Ganguram or Nepal Sweets. The ladoos are left to be eaten by a John, probably some one with a more Catholic culinary tongue. This 'closedness' of the Bengali's tastebuds manifests itself in various ways: in the narrator's uneasiness with Shehnaz's vegetarianism ('That day I realised, with the disappointment one feels when discovering another person's hidden nature, that Shehnaz was a vegetarian' *Afternoon Raag*, 61)'; in the dialectic Jayojit draws between 'home-made food' in India and 'frozen dinners' (*A New World*, 23-24) in America. The difference, albeit one of a leisured home-bred culture and a fast-paced work culture (home-bred versus pizza-bread), is more of the openness of the temperament and the tongue ('Home food was safe and insipid, and had a tranquility about it', *A New World*, 14). The contrast extends to the simplicity, yet tastefulness of home-made food against the glamorization of food in America (*A New World*, 14); the emotionality of food

cooked by the mother here ('It was an honest, even joyful, effort by his mother, though it had not quite worked; but it was not wholly tasteless either' *A New World*, 14) against the impersonality of food cooked there ('These days, in America, he looked at food, as he did many other things, emotionlessly, as something that could be put to use and cooked quickly', *A New World*, 23-4). The addition of the Chinese narrative to the kitchen discourse, a creeping little narrative of the 'eating out' culture into the Bengali rannaghar (kitchen), to Chaudhuri's contemporary culinary chronicle, is his effort at polyglotism. The clamouring of 'chowmein chowmein' (*Freedom Song*, 38) becomes a mimic-discourse of the instant noodle Maggi advertisement 'Maggi chahiye humein abhi', a semiotic of how the media-generated culture of consumption influences the cook and his culinary art. Continuing with Chaudhuri's strained relationship with culinary otherness, the Chinese 'meal' in the middle class Bengali kitchen is always a 'snack', never a 'meal' (*Freedom Song*, 38). In Bhaskar's mother's rannaghar, it is always the peripheral narrative, the other, while fish and rice remain at the centre, the staple of the Bengali's diet.

But the othering of food is a constantly shifting paradigm for what is othered becomes dependent on the Bengali subject's locale. As a schoolboy, the 'taboo' and the 'exotic rubbish' were the other (*A New World*, 51) – the denied was delicious; but for a divorced lecturer in America surviving on frozen dinners, the indigenous luchi has transmuted into the exotic other. One encounters in Real Time, Chaudhuri's most recent work, a subtle moving away from his earlier fiction, a more opentonguedness to other cuisines. His dastar khwan, in the short stories, has a place for variety: chicken tikka, kababs, koftas, chicken korma, bhuna meat, dhansak, biryani, chicken manchurian, fried rice, fish and chips, an emblem of a culinary cococolonisation in the polyglot bazaar of the world.

Chaudhuri also constructs a semiotic osmosis of cultures where the contrast between the mother's (*Afternoon Raag*, 45-46) and father's method and manner of eating –

My father, the most serious person at the table, uses, unexpectedly, a fork and a spoon to eat (*Afternoon Raag*, 46) – become indexical of a subtly hidden dialectic between an

indigenous culture's resourceful way of dealing with situational constraints of the famine of food by the narrative of remembering and another culture's osmotic adaptability in accepting other's customs and making them their own.

Strangely, although Chaudhuri himself claims to have learnt, if not mastered, the culinary art, in the politics of his representation, it is only the women who cook. In his texts, we find women in the tradition of Behula of the *Mangal Kavyas*, feeding their husbands with culinary erotica, and winning over the world as mistresses of spices. The taste of food becomes indexical of the bou's worth ('You must taste the koi' she said. 'Our bou made it' *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 70. This again, is a continuation of the same tradition of Bangla literature; "Shona nache kona/ Balad bajay dhol/ Sonar bou redhe rekheche/ Ilish macher jhol" which means 'Shona dances in the corner/ The ox plays the drum/ Sona's wife has cooked/ Hilsha fish curry'.[98] The only difference is that Chaudhuri changes the 'ilish' (hilsha) fish, a trope for East Bengaliness to the koi. It could have been any other fish too.); the mother in Afternoon Raag is presented as the mistress of miracles, the creator of magic potions ('Such a good cook was she, and such an inspired purchaser of herring and stewing lamb, that my poor father, neglected and underfed for six years, rapidly gained weight and happiness after marriage', *Afternoon Raag*, 57). It is only in the eyes of the greencard holder son that the mother is seen as 'a domestic machine', a relic from the nineteenth century household (*A New World*, 40). In Chaudhuri's semiotic system, the art of cooking is certainly the first step in becoming a sugrihini (This child rhyme perhaps sums up this attitude the best: "Chi chi chi chi/ Rani radhte shekheni/Jjathaimake bole, jholey masla debo ki?/Suktonite jhal diyeche, ambolete ghee/ Chi chi chi chi/ Rani radhte shekheni/ Paramanno redhe bole, fan felbo ki?/ Bhojbarite khoj poreche- ekhon upai ki// Chi chi chi chi/ Rani radhte shekheni" which means 'Shame shame shame shame/ Rani hasn't learnt to cook/ Asks her aunt, 'which spices should I put in the curry?'/ She has put chillies into the bitter curry, and butter in the sweet and sour dish/ Shame shame shame shame/ Rani hasn't learnt to cook/ Having cooked payesh, she asks whether she should throw out the starch water/ There's a call from the house holding the feast; now what is the solution? /Shame shame shame shame/

[98] See *Misti Chora Tapur Tupur*, (Calcutta: Paschim Banga Bangla Akademi, 1998), 22.

Rani hasn't learnt to cook'.[99] Apart from the men who are labeled as cooks, there are only two men who talk of their encounter with salt and spices in the kitchen. The young man, whose parents have thrown a housewarming party, claims to be a good cook; but his foray into the kitchen is not shown (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 198-99). The other man is the uncle, the oddity, but he survives mostly on instant mixes rather than a self-cooking system. The tastelessness of this male-cooked dish is quite easily discernible in The old house at Belsize Park had foul curry smells (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 151).

In this food-feminine discourse, Chaudhuri also brings in the typically female narrative on the chewing of paan, the betel leaf ('Chhordimoni. . . had spent the morning making little pyramids out of betel-leaves, stuffing them with betel-nuts', *A Strange and Sublime Address,* 80). This is again a continuation of the tradition from Kalidasa'a *Raghuvamsa*, Shudraka's *Mrcchakatika*, and the travel writing tradition of Ibn Batuta. Chaudhuri's use of this sign becomes a socio-cultural comment on this communal discourse of the lady's few hours of leisure before she gets back to the only room she can call her own, the rannaghar (kitchen).

Apart from a couple of mentions of hard drinks and an occasional Gold Spot, Fanta or Coca Cola, the only drink brewing in Chaudhuri's bawarcheekhana is the tea. Amidst the various language games that Chaudhuri plays in stirring out the cuppa, the optic of the tea liquor constructs a social semiotic of its own. Tea is the binder of social conversation, the promoter of the Bengali adda culture (*Freedom Song*, 20); once the coloniser's drink, it is the heralder of the Bengali's morning ritual. Significantly, the different preparations of tea are also indexical of social stratifications: the tea taken by the insomniac mother in *Afternoon Raag* ('so weak that it has a colour accidentally golden' *Afternoon Raag*, 15) the very light liquor, is a culinary trope for the upper middle class, the kind of people who give their servants Pears soap to use (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 173); the tea smelling rancid is drunk in the middle class household ('The smell of tea, strong and bitter-sweet and a little rancid, like sweat, had begun to waft through the kitchen',

[99] See Prabhat Basu & Mohendranath Dutta, *Chhotoder Chora Sanchayan* (Calcutta: Sishu Sahitya Sansad Pvt Ltd, 1959), 48.

Freedom Song, 9), the kind of people who wash their hands with Lifebuoy soap (*Freedom Song*, 9); lowest down in this menu is the tea prepared by Rahman for the new maidservant (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 184). Apart from the changing status of tea produced by juxtaposition of a contrary (*A New World*, 26), the most interesting use of the tea-sign is Chaudhuri's use of it as a 'grown-up' drink ('it was a sign of adulthood to drink tea', *Freedom Song*, 8) which is a clever counterpoint to the beer of the West. Another way in which Chaudhuri uses tea to communicate Bengaliness is to use the 'cha-biscuit' as a sign (*Freedom Song*, 152; *Real Time*, 157).

Chaudhuri frequently resorts to juxtaposition of contrary signs to interpret differences in the taste of food. These juxtaposed contraries, without becoming hybridities, is Chaudhuri's postcolonial spread: Jayojit's luchi with Bonny's cornflakes; luchi and pithha of the Bhaskar household with the hybrid breakfast of milk and toast and rosogolla of the Mohit household (*Freedom Song*, 8); Bonny's daal with the curry and fish of the other Chatterjees. But the most interesting juxtaposition is the one between the narrator and his father's empty plate and the 'beggar's plate' of the mother ('At dinner, our leftovers – chicken bones, ribs, the white comblike tail of the pomfret, which is simple and symmetrical – we deposit upon her beggar's plate for her to chew and gnash and then blissfully spit out' *Afternoon Raag*, 46). This is not merely a record of food habits but a socio-political comment on East Bengali cuisine.

There is a greater degree of adventurous inventiveness in the cooking of East Bengal. Perhaps it is because of the terrain, which is untamed, crisscrossed with the great rivers of the Bengal delta, rivers that rage with flood waters, erratically change course, blithely destroy human settlements, and throw up intensely fertile silt deposits that produce rich harvests for new settlers. Perhaps, under such a prevailing sense of uncertainty, you learn to make do with very little and yet turn it into something palatable to accompany the 'mountains of rice' needed for the voracious Bangal appetite.[100] The reiterative use of the fish-head sign is not an indicator of the frugality of the thrifty Bengali. Rather Chaudhuri comments:

---

[100] See Chitrita Banerji, *The Hour of The Goddess: Memories of Women, Food and Ritual in Bengal*, (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2001), 41.

My mother made things from peelings, fish-heads, dried fish. It was East Bengali cuisine, with its origins in villages on drought and flood-hit riversides, a poor man's diet, perfected by people who could not afford to throw away even the skin of a white-gourd or the head of a fish, transformed into food by adding oil and garlic and chilli paste and poppy seed and common salt (*Afternoon Raag*, 82) (The significance of the fish-head can also be tasted in this simple child rhyme "Mach katle muro debo/ Dham bhangle kuro debo" which means ' If I cut the fish, I will give you the head of the fish/ If I thresh the paddy, I will give you the rice'.)[101]

This is the only possible diet of the 'refugee' East-Bengali, a marginal, anonymous people who were neighbours with history, one of the millions, studying, discussing politics, listening to songs, living in hostel rooms, eating in the 'cabins' of North Calcutta (*Afternoon Raag*, 87).

This brings us to the defining semiotic of the Bengali: fish ('He loved this city. He loved its fish, rui and katla and koi with black oily scales, and during the monsoons he would cry out a truism that he repeated with great ardour at this time every year : "Ilish is the king of fishes!"', *Freedom Song*, 52). Chaudhuri's writing, albeit a continuation of the tradition of the *Brhaddharma Purana*, is essentialised in that famous comment by Ramakrishna Paramahansa in 1833:

I love to eat fish in any form.[102]

Fish appears in both its forms: fresh and dried. And is often compared with children ('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). And though it is the fresh rui, boal, pabdaa or parshe (the fish without bones is given preference, a typically probashi Bengali trait) that swim across Chaudhuri's curried pages, he also talks of dried fish, whose smell withstanding ('bitter and sharply intimate as the scent of a woman's sex', *Afternoon Raag*, 21), has a unique taste by itself. The dead fish, with its eye, still, in the socket, is a unique sign again (*A New World*, 15-16); one encounters, not for the first time in his work, an appetizing food item presented

[101] See *Misti Chora Tapur Tupur*, (Calcutta: Paschim Banga Bangla Akademi, 1998), 26.
[102] See K.T. Achaya, *Indian Food: A Historical Companion* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 128.

in a curious and questionable manner. The fresh fish, perhaps not to be found outside Bengal, also becomes an exotic other (*Real Time*, 107)). So important is the fish in the Bengali's world that the Bengali Brahmins, with a sleight of the hand of the mantras, vegetarianised the denizens of the deep, calling them the 'fruits of the ocean' (the Chatterjees in *A New World* are fish-eating brahmins) and fish motifs or the fish itself are a must in almost every festive occasion. The image of the piscatorial Bengali ('When the faint aroma of the fish preparation drifted through the air, they breathed deeply, in a satisfied way, as if the moment of subtle inspiration had passed, leaving them fulfilled', *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 119)) is most revealingly brought out by Chaudhuri's politics of exclusion: there is hardly any meat-loving Bengali (Jayojit is an occasional steak-eater, *A New World*, 173) in his work. Chaudhuri's phrase, used for the men of the 'other' England, 'the last chain-smokers and meat-eaters of England' (*Afternoon Raag*, 193) sounds, in fact, like an indictment. There is, on the reverse side, another important exclusion: although Chaudhuri takes us to two shraddh (funeral) ceremonies, he shows us people having sweets (*Freedom Song*, 5; *Real Time*, 67); matsomukh, the day of going back to the normal meal of fish and rice is never shown.

Another important narrative to this discourse is the relation between food and health, how this discourse is translated and transmuted from academic journals to the Third World doctor's tongue, and how it also appears as a part of the narrative in a book of fiction or the common man's sense.

'You know one thing', the doctor had said, 'a lower middle-class Bengali's meal is one of the best a doctor can recommend. Low cholesterol, with harmless fish protein. It's cheap and it's good for you; you know certain kinds of fish fat are good for the heart. Anyway, I was reading somewhere', he said (these doctors, even in their semi-retirement, kept up with the latest medical journals), 'that Americans eat much less meat than they have ever before and have fewer heart attacks. On the other hand, heh' he laughed, partly in embarrassment at his own amusement, 'Bengalis go there and find a plethora of meat, and eat much more of it than they ever have, and consequently die like flies' (*A New World*, 173).

Quite significantly, it is the young characters in his fiction who show and talk about this awareness. ("Sugar?"; "Two". "Two?", she said noting he was overweight. *Real Time*, 79).

Or,

He (Jayojit) himself felt tempted (by the jhalmuri), but he'd promised himself not to get diarrhoea or gastro-enteritis if he could help it; or wind (*A New World*, 58).

Thus, on this ground, there is a counter-discourse to the one constructed by the earlier generation.

A suspicion found its way to his head which he'd never harboured before: had his father become so bulky because his mother had overfed him during his working life? He'd always assumed that his father, at some point in his life, had inadvertently eaten too much; but now he wondered if his mother had deliberately played a part (*A New World*, 45).

Not content with this, Chaudhuri uses the trope of food itself as a rhetorical and literal marker for age: while 'toast' might be the synecdoche for the Admiral's breakfast, the manner of having it (buttered, with marmalade or dry, *A New World*, 40-41) becomes a marker for his age. But dietary habits, of course unhealthy, are also indexical of living habits, loneliness, laziness ('His dietary habits were strange, like those of people who had lived all their life in the desert'. *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 152). Often, in this discourse, it manifests itself as a 'lack' ('They sat in the dark for some time, talking about why servants were all like this, and they decided it was because they had not eaten proteins when they were children'. *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 176); this 'lack' can also manifest itself in a different guise:

It was a beautiful flat, and to her (the maidservant's) eyes everything in it seemed to be made either of sugar or pistachio or jaggery or caramel or some fragrant, edible thing. The raised marble platform by the window would be sweet and cold as a mint lozenge if one could possibly

taste it, and the dark wooden furniture would have the bittersweet taste of burnt sugar (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 179-80).

Here, the new maidservant's mental landscape is inhabited by a gastronomic psychographics, a possible result of the manifestation of the most vital trope to her existence – food.

New tropes come to add themselves to the postcolonised Bengali food discourse. One such is the caterer, in many ways, an expression of the noveau riche (*Freedom Song*, 5); another is the metamorphosed 'new' kitchen.

The kitchen had been painted; new shelves had been fitted; and the earthen oven, dust-coloured, hollow, into whose sides Durga pushed wood and coal, had been put in the shed at the back of the house where coal and wood used to be kept. Durga herself had returned to her village (*Freedom Song*, 36).

In a land where good food is found, cooked, and eaten, in Francois Bernier's words, 'the best place in the world to live in' (AD 1600)[103], it is but natural that no conversation can veer away from food

'When will you come here again?, asked the doctor.
'. . . . Early April, in this awful heat'.
'Oh, very good!' said Dr. Sen, and chuckled. 'Just in time for the mango season'.(*A New World*, 174-75).

That is why Chaudhuri makes the Sikh driver's Bengali in Hindusthani accented 'language smell of onions and chappatis' (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 45) or Sharma's words 'smell (of) chick-peas being roasted in their shells' (*Afternoon Raag*, 131). Pain and pleasure, agony and ecstasy, all the different fibres of life, come to be metaphorised in tropes of food.

---

[103] See K.T. Achaya, *Indian Food: A Historical Companion* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 128.

'It cut as if someone were putting salt upon it, Khuku re', (*Freedom Song*, 42) says Mini about the pain in her arthritic foot. This, following Khuku's mother's words, 'Ei Nando',. . . 'Bring the salt and the oil !' (*Freedom Song*, 33), a few pages earlier is an ironic use, by Chaudhuri, of similar signs to represent two different planes of experience, pain, and the quintessential Bengaliness of a meal.

There are polarities in Chaudhuri's food discourse too. Note the registers he uses in describing chilli sauce and gur.

It (the gur) was like a clod of earth. . . . . 'You mean you eat this?' they'd say. (*Freedom Song*, 200)

. . . thick drops of the sauce, pale green, like something that flows in drains, had fallen out sluggishly. (*Freedom Song*, 38).

On being asked, Chaudhuri says,

I always thought that sort of thing looked both poisonous (some of these sauces have been banned because of the chemicals in them) and irresistible; I have also been both repelled, and oddly fascinated, by drains. Joyce's image of the snot-green sea has also always fascinated me. But I was trying also to describe what chilli sauce seemed to me like in memory.[104]

At the other end of the spectrum is Chaudhuri's use of food as prasad .

She arranged slices of cucumber and oranges and sweet white batashas on three brass plates and placed them in front of the gods. (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 35-36).

The oranges, batasha and cucumber, significantly, a semiotic simulation of the Indian tricolour, offered to the gods and goddesses, become Chaudhuri's tropes for using food as a political and/ or national discourse.

[104] Quoted from one of my correspondences with Amit Chaudhuri.

Significantly, there is one optic missing from Chaudhuri's culinary semiotic: the semiotic of colour. Very rarely are food items (re)presented in terms of their colour. In doing so, Chaudhuri is taking a political stance against the contemporary culinary discourse of representation of exotic rubbish that is spruced up with all kinds of colours and decoration. Television shows of cookery programmes and magazines with sections devoted to cooking 'glaze surfaces, to round them off, to bury the food under the even sediment of sauces, creams, icing and jellies. This of course comes from the very finality of the coating, which belongs to a visual category, and cooking according to Elle is meant for they eye alone, since sight is a genteel sense'.[105] Chaudhuri does away with one of the major 'developments' of genteel cookery: ornamentation. His culinary discourse is grounded in the real, not the magical of these surreal programmes which mythicise the everydayness of food. 'Pieces of boal fish, cooked in turmeric, red chilli paste, onions and garlic' (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 6) has no 'mythical economics'[106] behind it. Chaudhuri's is neither the 'idea-cookery' nor the 'cuisine of advertisement'; his food discourse, in being rooted to a social semiotic, the 'great drama' centering around food in middleclass India (see interview with author), proves itself to be a subversion of the prevalent food discourse of consumerism. But to make up for that, or as the culinary discourse would have it, to mask that lack of flavour, Chaudhuri gives us a text that is seeped with the smell of spices ('our fingers retained a smell of spices' *A Strange and Sublime Address,* 199). And just as the hand retains the smell of the food eaten, the tongue of the reader's mind holds within itself the flavours of the gourmet's paradise that is enclosed between the covers of Chaudhuri's fiction.

Let us read two passages on how the Bengali meal goes.

Pieces of boal fish, cooked in turmeric, red chilli paste, onions and garlic, lay in a red, fiery sauce in a flat pan; rice, packed into an even white cake, had a spade-like spoon embedded in it; slices of fried aubergine were arranged on a white dish; dal was served from another pan with a drooping ladle; long, complex filaments of banana-flower, exotic, botanical, lay in yet another

[105] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* selected and translated from the French by Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 1993), 78.
[106] Ibid., 79.

pan in a dark sauce; each plate had a heap of salt on one side, a green chilli, and a slice of sweet-smelling lemon. The grown-ups snapped the chillies (each made a sound terse as a satirical retort), and scattered the tiny, deadly seeds in their food.

This is the second passage:

The procession of tastes at a Bengali meal runs from a bitter start to a sweet finish. Lunch will start with a bitter item shukto (this is usually omitted at dinner) made from neem or other bitter leaves, the bittergourd, brinjal, potato, radish and green bananas, with spice pastes that use turmeric, ginger, mustard and celery seed. Rice is first savoured with hot ghee, salt and green chillies; then comes dhal accompanied by fried vegetables (bhaja) or boiled vegetables (bhata), followed by spiced vegetable items like dalna and ghonto. Then comes fish items, first lightly spiced ones like maccher-jhol, and then those more heavily spiced, followed by a sweet-sour ambal or tauk (chutney) and fried papads. A dessert of mishti-doi (accompanied by dry sweets), or payesh (accompanied by fruits like the mango) ends the meal, with paan (a betel quid) as a terminal digestive.

With a few concessions to a literary style, aren't these passages almost interchangeable? The first is from Chaudhuri's first novel *A Strange and Sublime Address* (6). The second is from Achaya's *A Historical Dictionary of Indian Food.*[107] This juxtaposition of two passages, meant for two kinds of intended readers, however, makes a few things clear: Chaudhuri's narrative is rooted to the 'real' kitchen of middleclass Bengal and, by virtue of its anthropological nature (and therein the similarity with the discourse of the food historian Achaya), shares an affinity with television programmes like 'Zaike Ka Safar' (A Journey of Tastes) which are rooted to the 'heshels' (kitchens) of small town India rather than Indian television shows like 'Khana Khazana' or 'Tarla Dalal Show' which have artifice and baroque as their unique selling proposition.

This passage from *A Strange and Sublime Address*, which almost reads like a 'menu-card' of a quintessential Bengali meal has another story to tell us. Let us read this passage

[107] K.T. Achaya, *A Historical Dictionary of Indian Food* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 21-22.

(from *A Strange and Sublime Address* p.6 quoted above) along with a similar Bengali child rhyme which does almost the same thing. The spirit of both the pieces is similar:

Biyete jabi?
Eksho baar.
Fisti khabi?
Eksho baar.
Khasta luchi?
Eksho baar.
Alur kuchi?
Eksho baar.
Bhetki fry?
Eksho baar.
Sauce o chai?
Eksho baar.
Macher jhol?
Eksho baar.
Mutton roll?
Eksho baar.
Ghee pulao?
Eksho baar.
Achar chao?
Eksho baar.
Chutney papar?
Eksho baar.
Doi tarpor?
Eksho baar.
Kheer sandesh?
Eksho baar.
Taaler payesh?
Eksho baar.
Sonpapri?
Eksho baar.
Sar rabri?

Eksho baar.

Chandrapuli?

Eksho baar.

Hajmi guli?

Eksho baar.[108]

which means

Will you go for the wedding?

A hundred times.

Will you have a feast?

A hundred times.

Will you have fried luchi?

A hundred times.

Fingerchips?

A hundred times.

Bhetki fish fry?

A hundred times.

Do you want sauce as well?

A hundred times.

Fish curry?

A hundred times.

Mutton roll?

A hundred times.

Ghee pulao?

A hundred times.

Pickles too?

A hundred times.

Chutney and papad?

---

[108] Annadashankar Roy, *Kheyal Khushir Chora* Vol 2. (Calcutta: Mitra and Ghosh Publishers, 1997), 14.

A hundred times.

Doi after that?

A hundred times.

Kheer sandesh?

A hundred times.

Payesh of taal?

A hundred times.

Sonpapri?

A hundred times.

Sor rabri?

A hundred times.

Chandrapuli?

A hundred times.

Digestive tablets?

A hundred times.)

This child rhyme is quite aptly and humorously called *Borjatri*, and its name makes clear, in many ways, how the spirit of both the pieces, Chaudhuri's and Annadashankar Roy's, are similar. Both seem to be enonces of what Bakhtin categorized as a "banquet for all the world".[109] 'Borjatri' in Bangla refers to the people who accompany the bridegroom to the wedding (bor: bridegroom; jatri: passengers); in the culture of Bengali weddings, these people who accompany the bridegroom are traditionally meant to be big eaters for whom the wedding feast is the greatest festivity imaginable. Although Chaudhuri's passage is about a simple Bengali meal, not banquets, the spirit of his passage, its 'gay and triumphant tone' has a kinship with Roy's poem. It is not only is this particular passage that this spirit comes through; the 'table talks' (that dominate the short piece When We Moved to this House, in *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 197-199), the 'positive hyperbolism'[110] in the descriptions ("These men emerged from hot, swinging kitchen doors with plates balanced upon their palms, and on the plates were huge 'paper'

[109] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 278.
[110] Ibid.

dosas. These are large white cylinders made of rice paste; from a distance, they looked like rolled-up rugs, and coming closer, they resemble ridiculous headdresses of vast importance; from table to table, the waiters bore them glumly, as if they were gifts". *Afternoon Raag*, 45), that make eating and drinking seem such a carnivalesque affair in Chaudhuri's work give evidence of his rootedness not to a monological discourse of postcoloniality but rather to a folk tradition, a tradition of the people, a tradition of Bangla child rhymes, lok geeti (folk songs) as well as to the 'universal spirit' of abundance that unites all folk literature (as Bakhtin's critique of Rabelais proves), a discourse whose subtext is that 'no meal can be sad'.[111]

There is another manner through which Chaudhuri, as an Indian writer in English, postcolonises food, and it is a method which postmodern writers have used often: this is the tool of intertextuality. Chaudhuri, a Lawrence scholar of note (his book *D.H. Lawrence and 'Difference'* uses intertextuality in its various forms as a reading tool to 'understand' Lawrence's poems) ends his second novel *Afternoon Raag* with a quotation from a poem by Lawrence. (Significantly, Jaidev, the twelfth century Bengali poet, ends his magnum opus *Geetgovinda*, a book about the cowherd-god Krishna and his beloved Radha, with tropes of food, specifically sweets, like Chaudhuri does here.) The poem is "Ship of Death" and Chaudhuri effects a masterstroke in reading this English poem by a modernist English writer with tropes of the colonised's food- pitha.

A little ship, with oars and food
and little dishes, and all accoutrements
fitting and ready for the departing soul...(*Afternoon Raag*, 132)

By 'translating' Lawrence's poem through the filter of the narrator's psyche to produce the metaphors of food ('...the memory of daal and sweet-potatoes being ground and mashed all day in the kitchen, then patted, shaped, and fried into pithhas, and left overnight in syrup' *Afternoon Raag*, 133), Chaudhuri creates breaks on the surface of the 'original' Lawrence text, gaps that are filled up by the 'transferred' metaphors of the

[111] Ibid., 283.

narrator's cultural text. In doing so, Chaudhuri shows how, through this reading (of the author Lawrence) and then writing (by the Indian writer Chaudhuri) of the osmotic process of interculturality, 'foreign' culinary practices, which I have shown, are in many ways, a continuation of the vernacular Bangla tradition of writing of and about food (especially in the child rhymes which seem to be seeped with the flavours of an essentialised Bengaliness), come to be coded and recoded through a 'glocalised' 'dish-course' as 'postcolonial food', as this enriched site of an Indian novelist writing in English and responding and reacting to two traditions (represented by Lawrence on the one hand and Jaidev on the other) proves.

This is Not Fusion: Then what is?

Our first encounter with *This is Not Fusion*[112] is mediated through the cover of the CD. The blurred signposts are defined: it is this undefined space of ambiguity that Not Fusion will traverse over the next few minutes of listening time. The imagined hybrid animal sculpted in dokra (significantly an alloy, 'metals' mixed in the right proportion); the saffron clothed person whose gender is left undefined in the clipping; 'Berlin' and 'Calcutta' appearing beside each other (separated matter-of-factly by a comma) in the first line and then 'Berlin' appearing later again, just below 'OK TATA'; the newspaper Motz half-covered by the inspiration for Moral Education defining an in-between space where the bright yellow 'Ideal Boy' is superimposed on the darkness of the homeless (with only an umbrella for a home); the tanpura on the front and the guitar on the back of the cover – the flag posts who would describe identities, of people and their music. This manifesto of an enriching doubleness, "not part of two different worlds, but a common inheritance ... inlaid into different parts of a single self, a single memory" (Chaudhuri, "A Note for the listener"), is declared in the beautiful composition Dotara (literally 'two strings'). "This music has no land/ This music has no name/ Don't know where it began/ Don't know from where it came": this is not the romantic sentimentalism or nostalgia for a nonexistent time before 'east' and 'west' aged and hardened into lineages. Rather it is the song or anthem, if I may, of people, if not generations who dream, in their sleep, without subtitles in any language. The person wearing saffron clothes holds a special meaning: Chaudhuri, in his essay "Thoughts in a Temple" (*Small Orange Flags*), says that saffron "is the colour not of belonging, or fitting in, but of exile, of the marginal man". Not Fusion, then, by extension, becomes the music of the exiled man, but this is a

[112] *Amit Chaudhuri and Musicians*, Times Music, 2007.

self-imposed exile, an exile from the majoritarianism of tradition(s), dreamily categorised as "Eastern" and "Western". From con-fusion via the ironic denial mode of Not Fusion, Dotara (the second song) travels a hundred and eighty degrees without encountering signposts of 'East' or 'West', from "I know that it's not fusion" to "But you said that this is not fusion"; here the movement from the "I" to "you" is not just the progression from private doubt to public acceptance, not merely creating and carrying an audience but a modernist's tactful and self-conscious attestation of the "music of ideas" (in the words of I. A. Richards).

What, then, is 'fusion' and why does Chaudhuri, almost adamantly, refuse to belong to this family or take up its surname?

The early twenty-first century Indian's affair with otherness plays itself in 'full volume' when one tries to trace a genealogy of Indian fusion music. "In East-West fusion as we know it here," says Chaudhuri, "the Indian representative is commonly a classical performer, and the bearer of an ancient tradition; the Western representative often a jazz musician, a well-known type of modern, the exhausted romantic who's had enough of modernity, and must renovate himself (it's usually 'himself') through contact with immemorial cultures.... One of the more problematic features of fusion is its wide-eyed transcendence not only of nationality but of locality, with the old ideal of the 'universal human being' reworked into the cunning, grasping innocence of our globalised world".[113] There is, within each piece of music that is branded as 'fusion', an ur fusion-music, one that demands a kind of uncomfortable conformity from its practitioners. This ur piece is, however, not a classic that one would expect such ur pieces to be. In the (simulated) rarefied world of subcontinental fusion music, it is, usually, a deliberate coming together of two heterogeneous systems or schools, a platform where there is no dialogue. Two people, and therefore two systems, speak in their native tongues, the flesh and tone of their tongues mimicking each other only through beats and pauses, and occasionally through gestures. It is almost like speaking in sign language, comprehensible only to its

[113] See "Inner Tension", *The Times of India*, 17th March, 2007.

practitioners. This exclusionist practice succeeds because of the listener's lack of education and exposure which partakes in and helps to accentuate the closed nature of such fusion work; this is obvious because there is (and cannot be) no school or gharana of fusion music.

Fusion music, by laying claim to individuality, supposes to challenge the absurd notion of the pure or the authentic. And in doing so, it sanctions as its inheritance a kind of unexplained rootlessness. The problem with Indian fusion music lies here. A deliberate positioning of disparateness discounts history and its complex network of veins that run as a framework to any piece of music, giving it its body and its weight. Indian fusion music, an oxymoronic nomenclature, has proliferated on this scavenged ground of selective amnesia. Singers from different traditions have come together with their support systems of musical instruments and created assemblages rather than organic entities which have the capacity for self-sustenance; while musicians have, time and again, reveled in the aesthetics of the patchwork, this kind of 'fusion' music has resulted in the assembly line production of pieces of music where "and" has become synonymous with fusion. But only adding is poor mathematics, as any musician will tell us; addition is not gain, it is only gaining girth and therefore losing the sense of a centre of gravity, losing sight of the origin. A piece of Indian fusion music has, therefore, no beginning or end; it is a late arrival's song of tired inspiration. There is no imperfection in Indian fusion music. This is not because there are no faults but simply because such a piece of music can never be perfect. Indian fusion music has become something like the parrot's song, mimicked without context and, therefore, sounding similar after a couple of listens.

In "so-called world music", the cultural-studies scholar Paul Gilroy has suggested, "authenticity enhances the appeal of selected cultural commodities, and has become an important element in the mechanism of the mode of racialisation necessary to making non-European and non-American musics acceptable items in an expanded pop market."[114] The effort to be 'authentic' in an age of digital remixing can often be hilarious. In Karan Johar's 1998 film *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, for instance, the bhajan "Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram" is sung to the beat of military marching music, with the

[114] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Routledge, 1993), 99.

Indian and British flags hung at half mast, as if in symbolic compromise. Often, an Orientalist construct is attested by a contemporary globalising mission (as evident in the famous works of Philip Glass), where the world lays claim to Indian music like a tourist carrying a favourite tune back after a holiday.

Unlike so-called fusion or world music, however, the compositions in *This is Not Fusion* are all bound by a spirit of 'historical provincialism'. The need to contextualise comes from the need to create a genealogy rather than remain content with producing bastard children. *This is Not Fusion* is inverse tautology, and by obliquely laying claim to this bastard term, Fusion, demands rights of inheritance, cleverly and rightfully, from two fathers. The middle name "Not" in *This is Not Fusion*, a defiant self-attested act of naming, says it all perhaps. As Chaudhuri has argued, fusion music cannot be an ahistorical monster. Is Not Fusion, then, a piece of history? Yes and No. Yes, it is a tract of personal history, the history of a family, displaced and still moving, meeting newer sounds on streets with new names on their Sunday walk everyday; it is the history of the global citizen interpreting the reflection on his window with the vocabulary of the provincial darkness of his self. It is an indirect critique of globalisation, a process which has killed provinciality and rendered the local paralysed. *Not Fusion* is perhaps one of the last sighs of the century, escaping from the global citizen's lips, a regret for what could have been rather than what once was. *This is Not Fusion* celebrates history with a footnote; its creators do not fight little wars over legitimacy, their music, unlike most contemporary music that calls itself fusion, does not ask the irrelevant temporal/time questions of "When?" and "Then?" and in refraining from doing so, frees itself from the other tired questions which fusionists who think of their genre as a fable tend to self-pose and then answer. If *Not Fusion* answers any question without being asked one, it is this, a Forsterian "possible".

Readers of Chaudhuri's fiction and poetry were perhaps half-prepared for this: *Afternoon Raag*, *Freedom Song*, *E-Minor*, the titles themselves had made evident what their creator's mind was moving towards. The short story "White Lies" (*Real Time*) was a very strong political commentary on the sudden revival of the ghazal and the bhajan tradition

in '80s India; dictated by commerce, and its ally, mediocrity, its revivalism, Chaudhuri showed, was urban in nature, and this revival was responsible for the death of many non-metropolitan traditions. The story was also, in many ways, a contemporary fable about music in the age of mechanical reproduction, about the triumph of the technology-enhanced recorded voice over the simple human voice.

The impulses which were at work in his fiction are evident in his music as well. By placing a stanza or two from the songs of Tagore or Nazrul in the narrative, he would deconstruct one with the other. Here is an example:

"She began a familiar song:
Lost heart
On a verdant road
I gather strewn flowers
By myself.
Park Circus; Shamsul Huda Haq Road. A pharmacy and a sweet shop at its entrance. Only a twenty minutes' walk from Khuku's house" (*Freedom Song*).

The aesthetic remains the same in his music. The nameless mythical animal ("This music has no name," Dotara) juxtaposed against the names of streets and places on the cover, familiar and unfamiliar, one interpreting the other as it were ("Berlin, Calcutta," for example) create the template of a provincial's (in Coetzee's enriched sense of the word) discourse even before we have heard the music. This is an enriching provinciality, a temper that is gradually drying out amidst the fierce forces of globalisation, a provinciality on which only creative artists can stake a claim, a temper which is not tied to place or the ontologies of origin. This, as we later hear and discover, is the voice of the flaneur, moving, roaming, discovering, commenting on and interpreting, for himself and the not yet enlightened world. This flaneur is a twenty first century modernist, picking up for later use, things for the anima mundi: lines from the backs of Indian trucks, sounds from the Berlin underground, a dhunuri from a man on the street, tones from refugee-newspaper sellers in Berlin and moralist-creators of municipality school posters, and

occasionally, Clapton's Layla in the morning and the All India Radio's theme tune in the evening.

Just as all his four novels begin and end with comings and goings, Chaudhuri's music is full of metaphors of travel and the rhythms of movements, of the underground (Berlin), of trucks (the near-replication of the movement on the truck in the tune, especially the notes following " kaala..." in Trucker), of the dhunuri man walking through the streets of old Bengal, pulling the string of the instrument and announcing his trade of cotton fluffing and quilt making (Dotara), the gradual movement of the day's brightness into evening, a sound that can be sensed only in music, never recreated in any other art-form (All India Radio), of the tired movement of refugees to foreign lands (the background of frustration in the daily movements of refugees juxtaposed against disco music in Motz, especially in the way Chaudhuri modulates the words in the second last line of each stanza in the song) and then the movement of music itself, from one tradition to another, the sound of musical osmosis in the The 'Layla' Riff to Todi.

The musicians of *Not Fusion* make their politics clear at the very outset: it is the politics of the secular modern Indian who finds "a little bit of this, a little bit of that" (Dotara) in his self. It is therefore no coincidence that Ramakrishna Paramhansa is Chaudhuri's emblem:

"The liberal humanism of the Bengal Renaissance formed the basis of the secular Indian state; the experiments of Ramakrishna, in which different ways of seeing existed in a sort of tension within oneself, formed the basis of the creativity of the modern Indian." (*Small Orange Flags*, 22)

If there is really any tradition in which we can categorise the musicians of *Not Fusion*, it is this tradition that Chaudhuri writes about above, the tradition of not belonging to any single tradition. "It's only natural that we belong to several places," says Chaudhuri, "all of us, not only because of fashionable air travel and possibilities made open to the diaspora, but because of history.... someone living in a single-room tenement in Park

Circus.... All these people, those who possess and those who don't possess, belong to a number of places". (*Small Orange Flags*, 69)

There is no pure; all cultures are hybrid. *This is Not Fusion* is the music of the early twenty first century urban Indian, a sound, as Chaudhuri says, "that might be true to that hybrid metropolitan milieu, something that might have been born from, and be played in, one of its neighbourhoods, rather than some pointed and repeated gesture of musical commingling".[115] It is this "hybrid metropolitan milieu" which gives birth to The 'Layla' Riff to Todi. This aesthetic of assimilation is not a new one. Here is Satyajit Ray, the film director, writer and musician, the artist with whom Chaudhuri shows similarities in aesthetic: "And if I love Chinese painting and Japanese woodcuts, it is not at the expense of my admiration for Cezanne and Pierro della Francesca".[116]

There is something else about Chaudhuri's Layla which brings to mind, almost immediately, another man's music and another milieu; it is the music of John Cage, the composer who, after his meeting with Gita Sarabhai, became influenced by Ramakrishna Paramhansa (the affinities of two men, an Indian and an American, separated by time and aesthetic, for a nineteenth century mystic-philosopher of the everyday, is not the only point of similarity between them). Although it can, in no way, be compared to John Cage's The Solo for Voice 58 (Amelia Cuni's experimentations with it included) in terms of theme or approach, there is something that binds Cage's composition with Chaudhuri's take on Clapton's Layla in my mind. The critic Douglas Hofstadter created a well-known acronym for Cage – Composition of Aleatorically Generated Elements. The chance operations in Solo 58, Water Music and Music of Changes, among others, a typical Cagean tool, are evident in The 'Layla' Riff to Todi. Cage spoke about his music as moving "from structure to process, from music as an object having parts, to music without beginning, middle, or end, music as weather". The aleatory, which characterises Chaudhuri's literary style, from the structure of his novels to his preference for the casual moment in his poetry, marks the birth of Chaudhuri's Layla: "I heard the 'Layla' riff suddenly one morning as I was practising Todi sargams" (note the word "suddenly")

---

[115] "Inner Tension", *The Times of India*, 17th March, 2007.

[116] See Satyajit Ray, *Our Films, Their Films* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1976), 155.

("Notes on the Songs"). The 'twang' in Dotara has a similar origin: "On one of the final days of mixing, I spotted a dhunuri-man, Mohammad Shoaib, outside the studio, and rented it to play the constant twang you hear on the song," says Chaudhuri, in "Notes on the Songs".

'The randomness of situations that lead to that "turn" speaks less of an ideological move than of associations formed suddenly in the subconscious; indeed, this aleatory quality rearranges the purposes, the telos, of colonialism and nationalism. What else but the subconscious can make Milton, Imre Nagy, The Seventh Seal, Mozart, the Ramayana, Nischindipur, Basavanna, Kerala, Chicago, Calcutta, France, not seem like delirious babbling, but part of a single literary history? And it's the dimension of the subconscious that distinguishes this tale of modernity from the narrative of post-coloniality.

In the latter, a confrontation takes place between Empire and local culture; English and indigenous forms of knowledge; colonizer and colonized. But in the story I've told, the battle, the struggle, takes place within the self, and not just between the self and an enemy outside it; the story of modernity is as much a story of self-division as the post-colonial narrative is one of Empire, domination, and resistance. In the narrative of post-coloniality, the mother-tongue, "Indianness", or "Bengaliness" are natural properties of the colonized, threatened by the processes of Empire. In the story of modernity, the mother-tongue and the English language are part of a transaction that, through disowning and recovery, define the "modern" self; the transaction is modulated from artist to artist, from moment to moment, and takes a radically new, but provisional, form in the work of the Anglophone writer — but it's precisely this inward tension that both enables and disfigures creativity in the life and career of the Indian "modern".'[117]

Dotara is a tri-logue, as it were, between an artistic subculture (the twang of the dhunuri in the song), a once provincial culture embalmed into a 'classical' tradition (the framework provided by the raga Brindabani Sarang) and a metropolitan discourse of recording 'history' and then arguing with it ("If you thought you could write its history/ That was a delusion"). *This is Not Fusion*, then, is about diffusion, the diffusion of

[117] See Amit Chaudhuri, "The Moor's Legacy: The Random Sources of Renewal", *The Telegraph* November 16, 2003.

cultures in which the old artefacts of identities are passé; it confirms and in the process tries to find a grammar in which these fluid identities can be cast, temporarily. For this is what Not Fusion celebrates over everything else – impermanence, evolution, freedom and in-inertia, in other words, process. It, however, leaves us without the sense of an ending as all things in 'process' must.

All India Radio reveals Chaudhuri's fondness for taking up a dialogue with his artistic forerunners by taking a text, usually a classic (for example, in "A Portrait of an Artist" early twentieth century Dublin metamorphoses into the late twentieth century decadent Calcutta and Stephen Dedalus is transformed into the ageing Bengali tutor, Bishnupada Chakraborty). P. Heldon's composition for the All India Radio theme, played and replayed, untiringly, to the rhythms of morning and evening, our sleeping and waking, have, like life itself, been elevated to the status of a myth or at least a likeness of it. And in having become so inextricably bound to the throbbing in our ears, it has gradually become expressive of faith (as markers of passages of darkness and light in our consciousness). Chaudhuri's reinvention of the "original" tune in the raga Marwa challenges that act of faith; as a modernist, his composition here (and in the "Layla" riff) work on the foundation of doubt and the peculiar degree of self-consciousness which this enforces requires the acknowledgement of its dual status where chance and the affirmation of choice are inextricably related but by no means consonant. All India Radio is, however, not a re-visioning of the familiar and the iconic in the sense of A. R. Rahman's populistic refashioning of the national song Bande Mataram. It is not an approach from the outside, a re-mixing or a makeover; rather it is born by looking within. Chaudhuri's rendition of this signature tune in the raga Marwa has the hint of the best of inventions which are actually discoveries, something that was already there, hidden, like gravity, waiting to be discovered. And this the arranger does with such innovation, as in Jonathan Impett's use of the trumpet, that the ellipses between Heldon's composition and Chaudhuri's seem 'natural' and thus, by extension of the metaphor, 'original'. All India Radio, my personal favourite, situated in the zone between interpolation and intertextuality, is, to my ears, speaking to rather than a speaking back to one of the defining notes (literally) of the Indian nation. Like Alfons Mazurkiewicz, the late

modernist Polish painter whose paintings seem to be constantly involved in a discourse across time and space with such masters as Cezanne, Klee, Mondrian or Albers, Chaudhuri infuses AIR with a personal element, difficult to define but essential, that brings an added dimension of artistic maturity and moral responsibility. In *Not Fusion*, the moral is perhaps this: in our postmodern fables of pastlessness, the only journeys possible are ironically through memory; so remember.

Is it a coincidence that most of the compositions in *Not Fusion* are about moving, about 'history ... passing', about the sound of the wheels on roads and in tunnels, or the wanderings of the Bauls in Bengal? *Is Not Fusion* a Whitmanesque song of the roadside or does it belong to the tradition of songs of the journey of the Indian subcontinent ("Musafir hoon yaaron," I am a traveller, says one quintessential Hindi film song)? It is both and more: Trucker is not, in spite of its name and theme, a song of the road; its humour laced irony ('Ok Tata Byebye, This is how we live and die, Sa re ga ga re pa ma'), backed by the convincing strokes of the guitar, is not the song of a man following the black fumes of the truck carrying these curses and wishes on its butt; rather the addition of the next line, "Bhali nazar ...ujala" after "Buri nazar wale tera muh kala" to create a couplet, creates a surplus, an alternative form of subjectivity in which an other collectivity and public life are imagined.

Chaudhuri's sharp ear (such is his fine sense of sound that he talks about the "snapping" of chillies as "a sound terse as a satirical retort" in *A Strange and Sublime Address*) notes the octave from sa to sa in the hum after the doors of the U-bahn close and the train resumes its journey (Berlin). The warnings ("Einsteigen bitte" and "Zuruckbleiben bitte"), as foreign to the structure of the raga as the language in which it comes to the listener's ears, create a drama which is foreign to Indian classical music (as Satyajit Ray has argued in *Our Films, Their Films*: "... the absence of a dramatic narrative tradition in Indian music.... A raga is a raga – with a single predetermined mood and tonality ..."). The German words are as foreign and at the same time as integral to the composition as "Datta Dayadhvam Damayata" and "Shantih Shantih Shantih" are to "The Waste Land": they create spaces, without drawing maps, of a fluid contemporary modernity; and just as

Eliot had to look beyond the European tradition to find words which could convey his vision, Chaudhuri looks beyond the mood and structure of his parent Hindustani Classical tradition to find something that could help him to make anew. "Things were made, then burned, then made again ..." (Berlin): this is Chaudhuri's aesthetic, to break and make anew, in other words, being in process; thus the song ends with the American girl's words, with no response from the man, leaving us, again, with a termination, not an ending.

Chaudhuri's fascination for the spoken word, the lilt of the colloquial, the poetry hidden in (mis)pronunciation is something his readers are familiar with ("The Writers: On constantly mishearing 'rioting' as 'writing' on the BBC"). In retaining the political emphases of the original in Motz, he, like Duchamp, Woolf and other modernists, elevates the everyday to art. It is easy to get fooled by the tone of this urban ballad, the intersection of the personal and the social that is the source of the genre; it is, to my ears, almost an inversion of Moral Education, a looking behind the mirror. It seems as if Chaudhuri has stood on the threshold, watched the instructions given to the Bengali school child in Moral Education and then entered the underground in Berlin to hear the voice of the refugee asking commuters to buy the Motz; the tones are similar, though uttered from different sides of the world. *This is Not Fusion*, then, does not follow the easy routine of borrow-replace-create, Auld Lang Syne developing girth to become Tagore's Purano Sei Diner Katha; it creates a new vocabulary of exchange which proves that dialogue is possible between cultures, between certain moods of tradition rather than mere elective affinities of musicians whose inspiration results in physical positioning of disparateness, material representations or embodiments of two cultures yoked together by violence as it were.

Just as his dissertation on Lawrence offers us an insight into the aesthetic of his fictional work (Lawrence's aesthetic of the patchwork and the bricolage model, for example), Amit Chaudhuri's critique of Arun Kolatkar's "Jejuri" provides us with the keywords of his aesthetic in *This is Not Fusion.* Here is Chaudhuri on Kolatkar's "I am a poor man from a poor land":

"The first line is something Kolatkar read on a piece of paper of the sort that the semi-educated beggar in India used to hand out to people, often stating his profession and including a message in English, perhaps to keep some of his dignity intact. In the foreground is Kolatkar's scolding but very musical vocalizing; a spin-off on the beggar's plea that becomes a demand to the consumer, the singer asking his listener to pay up for his "damn good song"."

And here are the lyrics of Chaudhuri's Motz:

Thank you for listening kindly
And sparing me a second ....
Meanwhile do check your pocket
And please give me a euro.
And if you have no small change
I'll settle for a smile
I know you think it's strange
I've been singing for a mile.

This is Chaudhuri, again, on Kolatkar's music, the song "I am a poor man from a poor land":

"The genre, here and in the other songs, is metropolitan and immediate and hybrid; inescapably but complicated 'Indian', without any of the sentimental assumptions of 'world music'."
And then he says something that is not quite true: "It's a style that hasn't occurred before or since."

This style reappears in *This is Not Fusion.*

If *Not Fusion* fails, it will not be because of its musicians; we will be responsible. We are so used to "system" writers and "system" musicians that any writer or musician whose work we fail to fit into our store of codes scares us. "It is doubtful if the discriminating minority will go for a hybrid if they can find the meat in a conventional movie," said Satyajit Ray on the new wave of Indian cinema. If we fail to grow an attachment with the

hybrid called *Not Fusion*, it simply means this – that we are uncomfortable with a part of our selves.

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

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

'Shrabyo amar dobe
Oderi ashrabye'.[120]
("My polite language is drowned by their impoliteness.")

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

---

[118] I am grateful to Grant Farred (Duke University) for his incisive comments on a very early draft of this piece; Mina Gorji (Magdalen College, Oxford), the convener of the "Impolite Nation" conference where this paper was meant to be read, for a kind of initiation into this 'rude' terrain; Jayantajoy Chattopadhyay for introducing me to 'impoliteness' (!) in contemporary Bengali literature; Sandeep Dutta and his Little Magazine Library and Research Centre, Kolkata, for providing me with a large part of the primary material for my work; Amit Chaudhuri for making me look at Ramkrishna Paramhansa's *Kathamrita* in a new light.
[119] D.H. Lawrence, quoted in Amit Chaudhuri, *D.H. Lawrence and 'Difference', Postcoloniality and the Poetry of the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 171.
[120] Rabindranath Tagore, *Chhara Samagra*, (Kolkata: Kalikalam, 2002), 27.
[121] Arun Mukherjee, "Whose Postcolonialism and Whose Postmodernism?", *World Literature Written in English*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1990, 1-9.
[122] Ibid., 3.
[123] Ibid., 5.

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

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

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

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

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

In the works of Amit Chaudhuri, we encounter, almost for the first time in the tradition of Indian Writing in English, an apotheosis of the Indian grotesque, a 'culture of the marketplace'.[125] By using Bakhtin's phrase consciously, I try to show how a kind of grotesque realism, with its roots in gross physiologism and biologism, result in the pages of his fiction being full of a 'people's laughter'. This rehabilitation of the flesh, with its strings tied to materiality, gives birth to the ugly, the monstrous, in simple words, the 'impolite', which is 'hideous' or 'rude' from the point of view of 'classic' aesthetics, that is, the aesthetics of the readymade and the completed. Chaudhuri's writing, with its (elective) affinities with modernist writing (in its fascination for the fragmented and incomplete[126]), therefore, in an ironic subversion of 'classic aesthetics', does away with the binaries of 'high' and 'low' culture, which was, in some way, the progeny of modernism.

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

---

[127] Utpal Dutt, *Ashar Chholone Bhuli*, quoted in Pradipto Bagchi, "*'Chhotolok' Ar Oder Bhasha*", *Abovash*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 30th April, 2001, 54.
[128] Quoted by Dutt in Bagchi, *Chhotolok*, 54.

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

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

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

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

I read Amit Chaudhuri's use of the 'impolite' in his fiction through this filter of the social semiotic. The subject of the 'impolite' assumes a neat binarism between the *bhadralok* (genteel) and the *chhotolok's* (philistine) language, with an obvious privileging of the polite in the pages of the Indian English Novel. When we talk of the *chhotolok*'s language, we mean (and here I cannot escape the temptation of using the Bengali words, whose strong onomatopoeic effect gives us the 'literal' and 'aural' sensation of the taboo in our so-called polite discourse of the everyday): the *oshlil, oshovon, kutsit, itor, gramyo.*[130] This is the language that has been marginalized by Indian English writers, who, with their upper middle class background would rather use euphemisms and oblique phrases rather than a more naturalistic language. Pradipto Bagchi, in an illuminating short piece entitled "'*Chhotolok' ar oder bhasha*" [131] critiques this (obviously) bhadralok-created division between *amader* ('our') and *oi* ('that') *bhasha* (language). He goes on to show how Tagore, while trying to adopt the idiom of the subaltern (which, in Tagore's language, significantly includes the woman; Tagore uses the phrase *grihocharini akritobesha asanskrita meyeli bhasha* to talk of 'impolite' language ('home-spun ill-clad uncultured womanish language'), uses the strainer[132] to strain out any language that does not suit the *ruchi* ('taste', an aesthetic, with a slight connotation of the moral here) of the

---

[129] Sandeep Dutta, *Slanguage,* (Kolkata: Kolikata Little Magazine Library O Gabeshana Kendra, 2000), 6.
[130] *oshlil*: vulgar, *oshovon*: obscene; *kutsit*: ugly; *itor*: ; *gramyo*: rustic
[131] Bagchi, *Chhotolok,* 51-56.
[132] Bagchi's word is 'chakni', 53.

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

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

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

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

> Gali tarey dile loke
> Hashe Nidhu archokhe
> Boley, 'Dada, aro bol, kan gelo juriye'.[134]
> (When people abuse him,
> Nidhu laughs with an oblique gaze,
> Says, 'Brother, use more abusive language'; translation mine).

[133] Ghosh, *Infusion Approach*, 3.
[134] Tagore, *Chhara Samagra*, 16

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

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

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

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

---

[135] Tagore, *Chhara Samagra,* 15. 'Dalkuttor' was a slang used to refer to the British; it means a mangy dog.
[136] Bakhtin, *Rabelais,* 16.

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

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

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

"Saala!" said Yusuf; and his mouth remained open.
"Don't abuse your brother-in-law", said Khatau, but he didn't feel like laughing. (*Real Time,* 56)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Registers are mixed in this language game:

---

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

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

Or,

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

Or,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The transformation of Suparnekha –

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

a body sculpted with villainous difference –

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

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

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

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

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

and its fragments are used for symbolic effect. In such a discourse, the earthiness of existence comes through with a tangible beauty: whether Chaudhuri is talking of three young boys having a bath naked ("They stood naked in front of the bathroom; their testicles hung silently and insignificantly like small, unplucked fruit. Babla's penis was hardly visible, a sleeping beetle everyone had forgotten to notice". *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 4) or of an old man cleaning his ear ("An old man sat all day cleaning his ear in front of a deserted petrol pump. *A Strange and Sublime Address*, 131-132), it is the materiality of his life-texts that strikes us. Yet, through the strength of associations that his prose evokes, this worldliness becomes polyphonic: the testicles of the young boys are compared to 'small, unplucked fruit' while Babla, the youngest boy's penis is called a 'sleeping beetle'. These comparisons cannot be innocent. Chaudhuri is one writer whose writing is evidence of the urban Indian English writer's uneasiness in talking of nature. And yet here, in describing the innocent reproductive organs of these young boys, he makes a (conscious) use of fruits and insects. If we go back to Chaudhuri's reading of Lawrence's aesthetic, we will realize that in reading Lawrence's description of 'Birds, Beasts and Flowers' as "his pantomime of nature" (*Lawrence and 'Difference'*, 60), Chaudhuri is offering us a perfect model to critique his own writing. The 'bricolage-model' (*Lawrence and 'Difference'*, 54-55)[138] that Chaudhuri constructs to read Lawrence's writing, one which I find quite similar to Ghosh's (In)fusion approach[139] when appropriated to understand Chaudhuri's texts, shows us how Chaudhuri deals with this ambiguous relationship of impoliteness: the bricolage constructed by the testicles-penis description, therefore, is rendered polite by the visual image invoked , of the

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

[141] Bakhtin, *Rabelais,* 7.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

One day Gopal was out with two of his fathers-in-law on a journey, one walking on his left, the north, the other on his right, the south. When Gopal decided to urinate facing southward, one of his fathers-in-law quipped, "What are you doing Gopal? Perhaps you don't know that it is outside the scriptures for a Hindu to urinate facing south during the day".
The other father-in-law said, "I have heard that you can't even pee facing north as well".
Gopal retorted, "Those words come from the learned. I am a rustic who doesn't care much for anything. I can urinate in any *mukh*; the *mukh* which my older father-in-law used, I urinate in that *mukh*, the *mukh* which my younger father-in-law used, I urinate in that *mukh* as well.[144]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

[145] *Gopalbhar*, 15.
[146] Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 39.

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

> In the beginning
> Jesus was called The Fish...
> And in the end (170-3)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

There were days when she wandered around the house with mehndi in her hair, which smelled like mud or manure till she had washed it off (*Freedom Song*, 55);
The rugger tryouts had taken the trouble, on-field, during the scrum, to wrestle and hug the earth completely and, by then end of it, to return with an unfaultable cosmetic exterior of dirt, sweat, and plastered hair (*Real Time*, 16).

As these quotations prove[148], Chaudhuri's aesthetic is one which privileges the mud over stone, the incomplete over the complete, becoming over being.

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

[148] Both the *mehendi*-mud on the hair and the dirt on the boys are meant to be washed off rather than preserved as the complete.
[149] '*Sotyikarer shilpokolar janasamarthan kam. Suthorang sekhetre ei adaloter rokhakoboj niye ashlil sahityoi sabaike chapiye jabe*', ('True Art does not receive popular acknowledgement. So 'obscene' literature shall sweep everything polite out of its way through the protective shield of the court') were Justice Sengupta's words. Quoted in Samaresh Basu, *Prajapati,* (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers Private Limited, 2003), 169.

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

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

Chapter 7

Under Cover: The Cover Illustrations of the Books of Amit Chaudhuri

Apart from the Books in which gods speak to men, those that also act as priests' side pillows, those one remembers just by their initial capital letters, *Bhagavad Gita, The Bible*, there is almost no other book, except the characterless telephone directory perhaps, which one can remember without thinking of its cover. The cover of a book is like a nickname, something that makes recollection easier and relationships closer. But like the nickname, however, cover illustrations often delude: they give wrong estimates about the personality of books. Very rarely does one encounter a book where the cover provides the skin to its character; the books written by Amit Chaudhuri belong to that rare category, where the covers seem, visually, to be a part of the writer's handwriting, tempting one to say that his books can be judged by their covers.

The cover painting on *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*[151] is the Reclining female nude by Jamini Roy, one of the many "ideal figures with over-large eyes that did not see, the repetitive shapes in repose", as Chaudhuri describes the artist's paintings in his short story "The Old Masters" (*Real Time*, 109). Roy's painting appearing on the cover of an anthology of "Modern" Indian literature is not just a happy co-incidence. Ratnabali Chatterjee in " 'The Original Jamini Roy': A Study in the Consumerism of Art" writes, "Caught between a colonial hangover and a feeling of nationalism bordering on chauvinism, the middleclass intelligentsia were oscillating between two extremes. The new style created by Jamini Roy suddenly offered three possibilities of release. It was reminiscent of the folk forms, the survival of a past tradition which was unmistakably Indian or rather Bengali, thus providing a cultural root. Second, the strong lines were comparable to those used by contemporary European artists like Leger. A link was forged with the international world of art, so necessary to the progressive Indian in the late

[151] Amit Chaudhuri, *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*, (London: Picador, 2001).

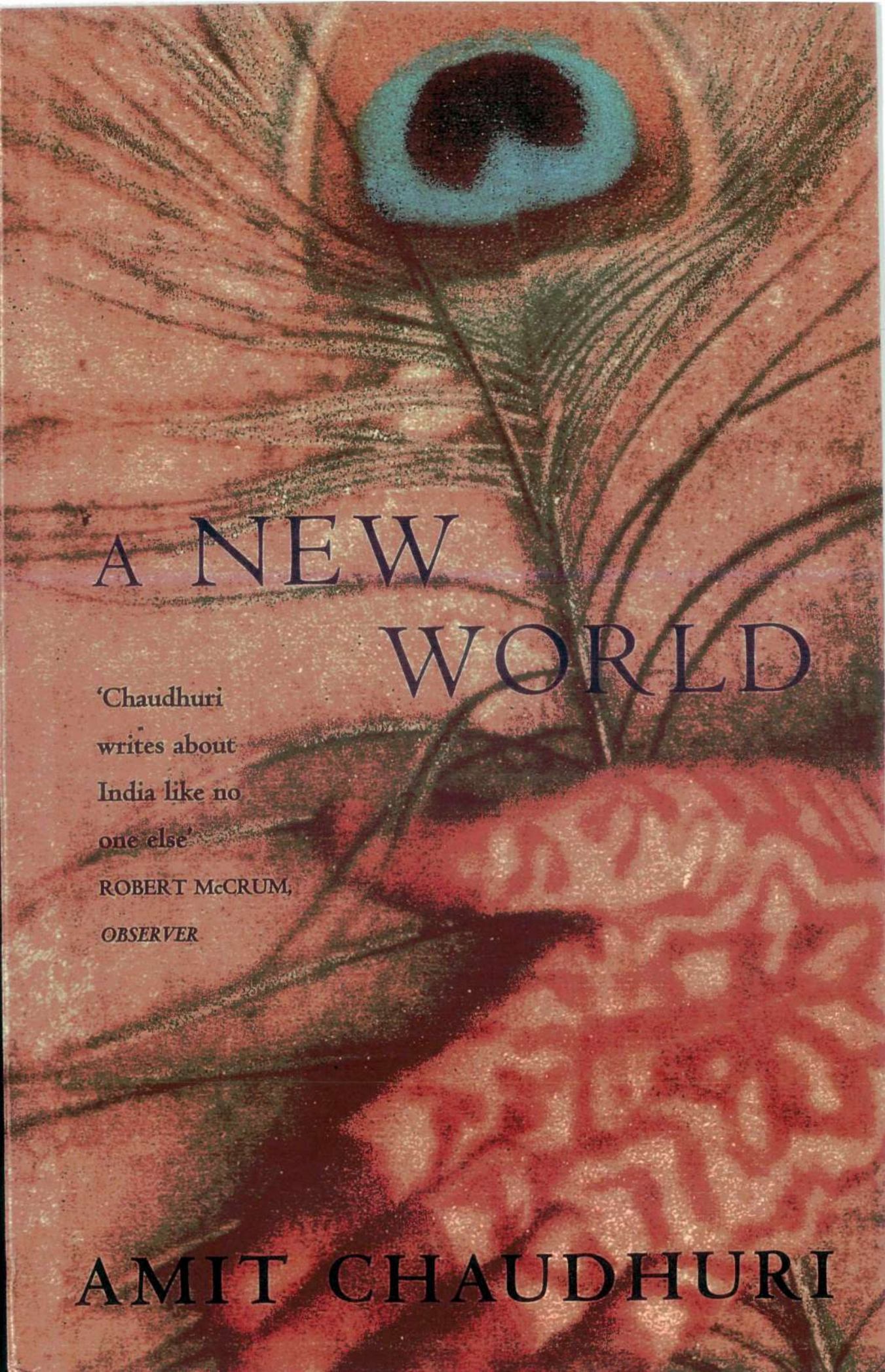
SMALL ORANGE FLAGS

AMIT
CHAUDHURI

1930s. Thirdly, to the younger artists the efforts of a single man offered a rescue route from the stylistic conventions of the Bengal school, which acted as a constraint on the depiction of contemporary events – the war and the famine".[152] Chaudhuri's equivocal relation with the aesthetic of Jamini Roy is evident in many of his poems but what is of interest here is Chaudhuri's politics, his need to create a new style, one that would offer release from the nation-novels Midnight's Children had fathered incestuously, one that was rooted to a certain vernacular tradition (Bengal Renaissance) and which, at the same time, allowed negotiations with an outside (British modernism). The colour of the background on which Jamini Roy's thick strokes have created an imaginary woman, a hybrid and atavistic creature, is noticeably, in a shade of blue, a bluish green.

Small Orange Flags (Seagull, 2004), a collection of essays about the gradual erosion of a 'secular' space in contemporary India, has Naveen Kishore's cover design, saffron splinters on white background. It has the appearance of being an 'excerpt' (from the left hand side) of a 'swastika' and reveals, apart from the writer's politics ("I can't say I unreservedly enjoy going to this temple," he says in "Thoughts in Temple", *Small Orange Flags*, 17; italics mine), his aesthetics, the "small", the details, the fragments coming together to form, not the whole, but, always, a sense of it, the familiar turning, in one epiphanous moment, into the not-yet-realised (the man eating breakfast goes "out of the house" to "explode" in the poem "Sticks, Stones and Names", *Small Orange Flags*, 31) , the "small" orange flags moving in the wind to become a pattern, a much-abused Hindu motif, just as lines and planes slide into one another to become a study in colour in Cezanne. The small orange flags, in the essay which gives the collection its name, "flying on the roofs of slum settlements on the outskirts, denoting the Shiv Sena's power if not necessarily its popularity" (*Small Orange Flags*, 7), whose "presence" (*Small Orange Flags*, 7) signified different things to different people ("to the Muslim, they signified a certain kind of disquiet about the present and unease about the future; to the non-Marathi, another kind; to the lower caste Hindu, yet another; and yet another to the representative of the middle class, whose life had generally held no terrors, except nightmares about

[152] See Ratnabali Chatterjee, " 'The Original Jamini Roy': A Study in the Consumerism of Art" *Social Scientist*, v 15, no. 164, Jan 1987, 5.



A NEW WORLD

'Chaudhuri writes about India like no one else'

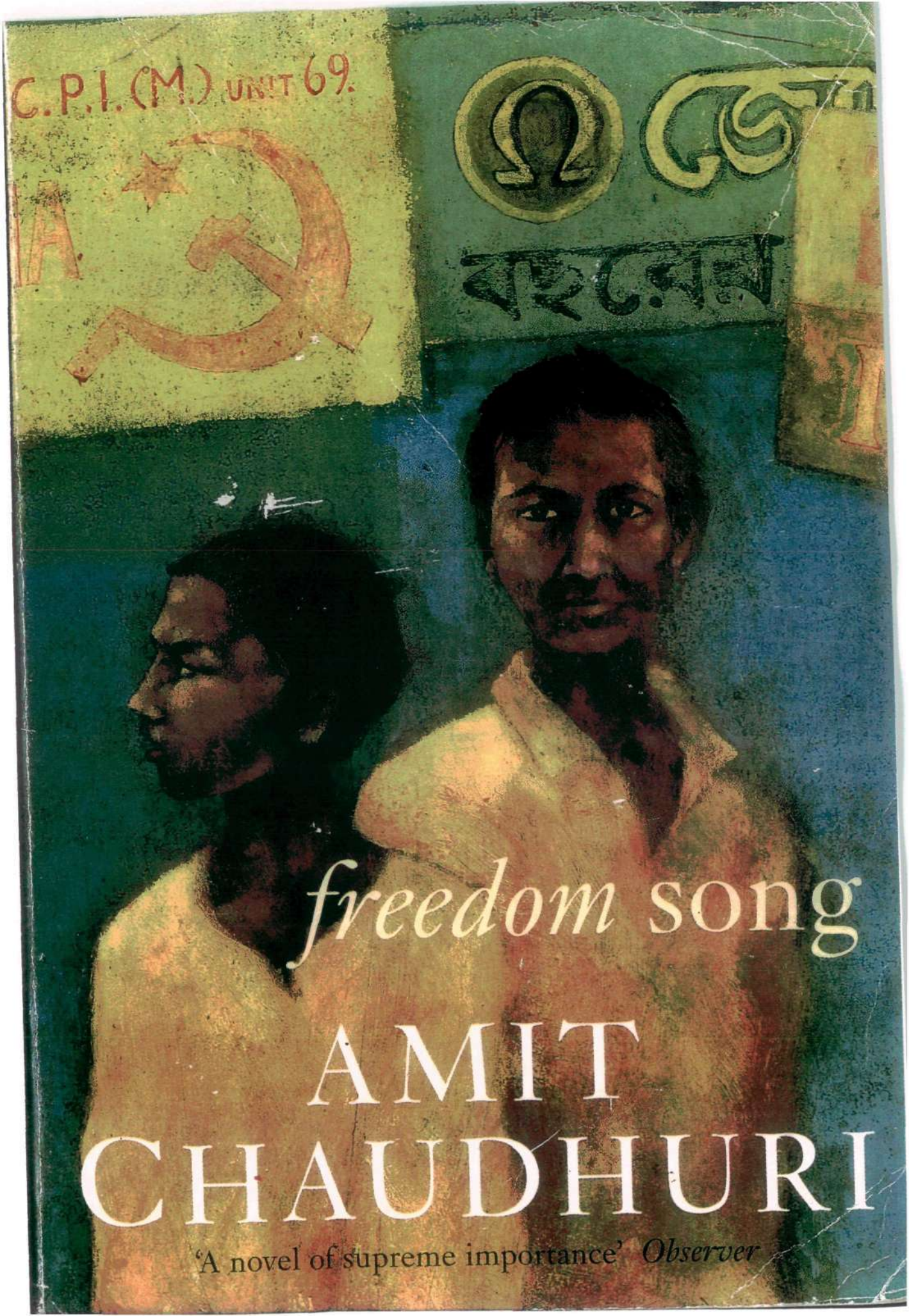
ROBERT McCRUM, *OBSERVER*

AMIT CHAUDHURI

promotion and children's school admissions and higher taxes, and to whom, if anyone, India had made sense as a nation and a democracy," *Small Orange Flags*, 7), appear as a harbinger and critique of "the subterranean violence which Hinduism is now charged within its totality" (*Small Orange Flags*, 18). Orange it is, then, that gives the book its flavour, whether it is something to drink ("the way preservative-free orange juice is trusted these days in the West," *Small Orange Flags*, 5), the colour of a religion ("Saffron, or gerua in the Indian languages: its resonances are wholly to do with that powerful undercurrent in Hinduism, vairagya, the melancholy and romantic possibility of renunciation.... Gerua represents not what is brahminical and conservative, but what is most radical about the Hindu religion; it is the colour not of belonging, or fitting in, but of exile, of the marginal man," *Small Orange Flags*, 20-21), the colour of an explosion ("go out of the house and explode," *Small Orange Flags*, 31), the colour of old Berlin or at least how Chaudhuri imagines Spender's Berlin ("those pre-war summers when Stephen Spender and company descended on Berlin, to sunbathe with god-like blonde boys," *Small Orange Flags*, 37; italics mine), in general, the colour of life lived "during a 'state of emergency'" (the subtitle of the collection).

It would be easy to dismiss the cover photograph of *A New World* (Picador, 2000) by Sharon Smith as another Orientalist wooing, the familiar Orientalist tropes, the peacock feather and the mehendi-dyed patterns on a woman's hand, but what challenges this reading, almost immediately after such a first thought, is the other shade of blue on the cover, the deeper blue trailing the blue of the eye of the peacock's feather, the three words of the title, *A New World.* Chaudhuri's fourth novel is "a new world" in many ways. It marks a bend in his aesthetic. "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 magic less world of postmodernity ... it is radically different because it is about everyday life without the magic of childhood," said Chaudhuri in an interview.[153] Similarly, the young bride's mehendi painted hands and the peacock feather, associated

[153] Sumana R. Ghosh, "Aalap: In conversation with Amit Chaudhuri" in *The Novels of Amit Chaudhuri: An Exploration in the Alternative Tradition* eds. Anu Shukla and S. B. Shukla (Delhi: Swarup and Sons, 2004), 175.



freedom song

AMIT CHAUDHURI

'A novel of supreme importance' *Observer*

with Krishna, the eternal lover, have been robbed off their usual 'innocent' signification. In this novel about failed marriages, the bride is no longer young, one having moved to a second husband while another, an expectant bride, is shown to lack the energy of believing in the "magic" of mehendi. Jayojit, too, is no Krishna: he lacks the lover-god's charm, his life is ordinary and eventless; Buffalo, after all, is no Brindaban and he is no lover – women, his wife included, run away from him. Krishna's power is centripetal; Jayojit's centrifugal. Chaudhuri's nomenclature, "a new world", allows parody, criticism, dialogue (with an ancestral tradition) and collaborates with play on geography, thereby moving the 'new world' from the west ("My America, My New Found land," cried John Donne in the sixteenth century) to the east (Calcutta). The cover, with its quiet and almost inverted irony, uses tropes tied to temporality – the beginning of a life of love, the hint of a wedding hanging around the margins – thereby deconstructing the meaning of 'newness', as if saying that nothing could be new anymore, not in this new world, not even the story which one is about to read, a story that is as old or as new as shadows.

Sarah Markes's cover illustration of *Freedom Song* (Picador, 1998) has two boys standing against the background of a wall with graffiti of electoral signs of political parties on it. This is a wall in Bengal, the wall speaks in Bengali, in spite of the few English alphabets; one of the boys looks to his right, the other, more grown up, faces the painter, but only obliquely. There is no strong sense of division, no thick line or contour, at the place where their profiles meet, so that they can be mistaken to merge into each other or, if one has to look at it differently, emerge from the same source. What is worth noticing is this: the boy looking to the right is the viewer's left, above which hangs the CPI(M) graffiti. Left and Right; the two boys, one taller than the other; graffiti for two different political parties; the orange and the green; even the optically palindromic number "69" ("C.P.I.(M.) UNIT 69") – all these exist in the same space. Here is Chaudhuri: "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." [154] And, as always, in Chaudhuri, the important is invoked as an absence. Like Bhaskar's play, the dominant motif of the novel, alive as an absence, the cover of Freedom Song, a novel set in a time

[154] Ibid., 183

just after the Babri Masjid demolition, makes no visual reference to the subject of fundamentalism, at least not directly, only the orange-tinted clothes of the two boys standing against the bluish green background. The CPI(M) graffiti, hanging from the left of the cover, is almost pegged like a moral in an amnesiac and ambivalently religious world. "The only thing I liked about the painting was the wall," said Chaudhuri. "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."[155]

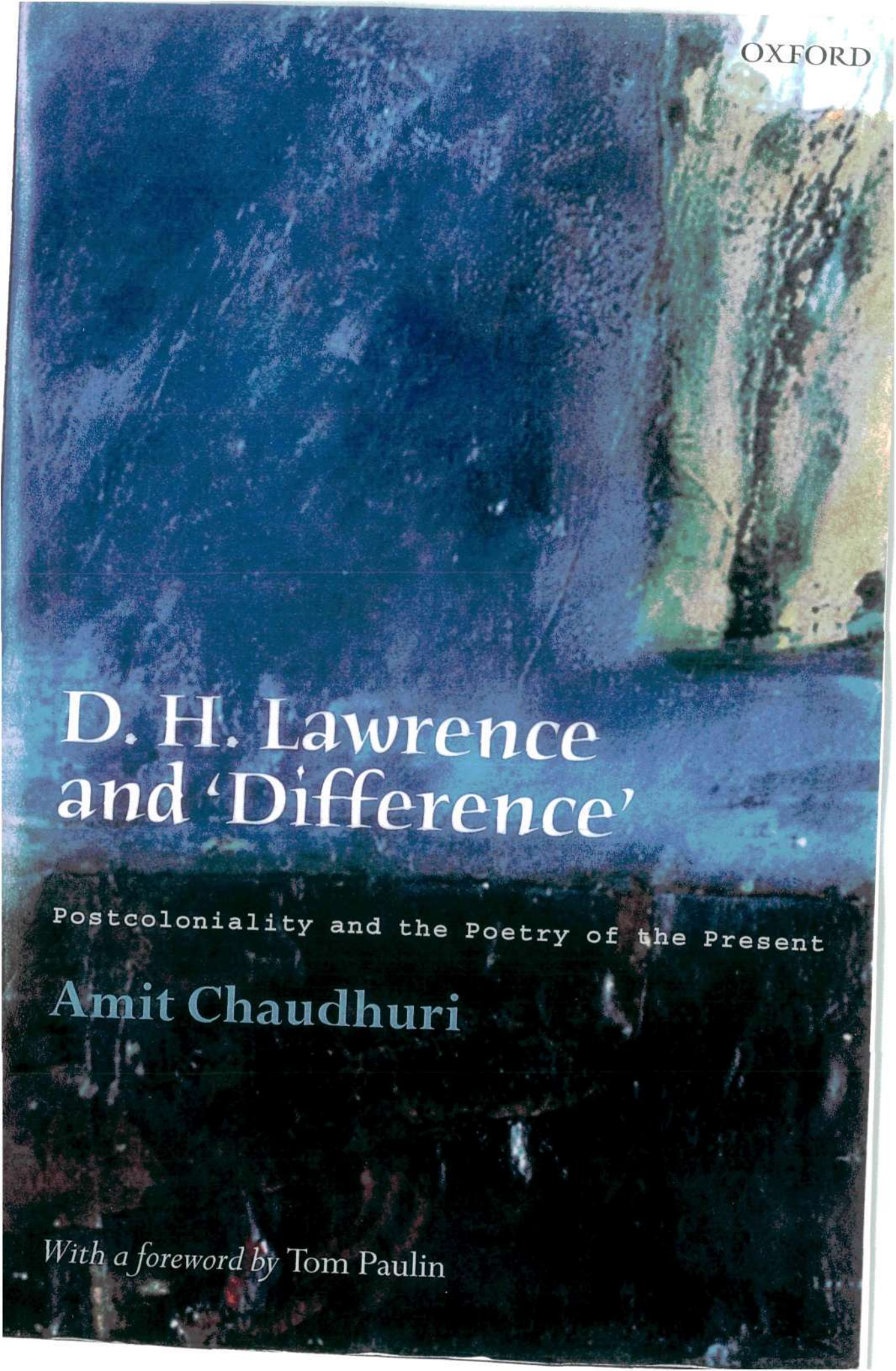
The "Chippewa River I: Blue over brown and dark blue," by Jef Gunn that wraps Chaudhuri's study of Lawrence's poetry, *D. H. Lawrence and 'Difference'* (Oxford University Press, 2003), is annotated, in my mind, by lines from Chaudhuri's poem "The Steamer" – "Water grew/ like a different sensibility, dark and extraneous" (p. 14); "this expansive, wrinkled web" (*St. Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 15). Chaudhuri's book "explores D. H. Lawrence's position as a 'foreigner' in the English canon" (blurb); in the chapter "Lawrence's Pictography", he writes: "What I am interested in is this material superimposition, rather than the mental or internal association, that leads to the effect of collage ... an external, tattoo-like end-product" (*D. H. Lawrence and 'Difference'* , 91). The language that Chaudhuri uses to talk of Lawrence's method can be useful in understanding the cover of the book itself: the text as "surface" (*D. H. Lawrence and 'Difference'* , 99); "grafting" (*D. H. Lawrence and 'Difference'* , 100); "gluings" (*D. H. Lawrence and 'Difference'* , 98); "touch and flow" (*D. H. Lawrence and 'Difference'*, 185); "unfinishedness", "liquid" (*D. H. Lawrence and 'Difference'* , 185). One needs to just substitute 'text' with 'river' and the Chippewa river's blue "over" brown and dark blue becomes an optic representation of Lawrence's method.

Roy Mehta's photograph on the cover of *Afternoon Raag* (Vintage, 1998) shows, without revealing, a part of a building. The picture is blurred, the foreground is made up of water droplets on glass through which the building is seen; the building could be a monument

[155] Ibid., 174.

though the camera's lack of focus on it annotates its seeming lack of significance; whatever it might be, it is certainly not home. The photograph has an aesthetic that one associates with a sense of half-remembering or an early morning dream, from both of which we remember something important, but only vaguely, a feeling similar to signing one's name with an inkless pen. This photograph has the architecture of a dream, of "that neutral and desirable intersection of public places and private ambition, that creates the surface of the dream" (*Afternoon Raag,* 67). The water droplets on glass in the photograph, apart from being closely linked to the writer's aesthetic of re-membering ("a few random drops upon/ the windowpane ... deflect and bring me back/ my childhood," writes Chaudhuri in his poem, "You Have Left Me with Nothing", *St. Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 45), become 'pointers' (a word I use in all its senses) of Chaudhuri's narrative technique in the novel. Pointillism, formulated by George Seurat and used to beautiful effect by masters like Matisse (in Luxe, Calme Et Volupte, 1904, for example), named for the little stippled dots of colour that cover the canvas, attempted to blend optical impressions and memories into a representational afterimage. The short chapters in *Afternoon Raag* that create the 'impression' of a foreign student's life in Oxford, his relationships with other students and his memories of home, are like the water droplets on glass which become a visual name for Chaudhuri's pointillistic style in his second novel. The water droplets in the foreground, with the blurred building behind it, also blur the distinction between foreground and background, break the inherent hierarchy between the significant and the insignificant, and transform, as Aamer Hussein says, "the seemingly insignificant into the matter of intense reflection".

Reed Wilson's illustration on the cover of *A Strange and Sublime Address* (Minerva 1994) looks like one of the houses in which the child-protagonist Sandeep's Chhotomama might have lived, "the pale walls, the spider-webs in the corners, the tranquil bedsheets on the old beds, the portraits of grandfathers and grandmothers, the fans that swung drunkenly from side to side" (*A Strange and Sublime Address,* 4); "the clothes left to dry on the terrace" (*A Strange and Sublime Address*, 72); a poster of a Hindu goddess. The cover is kitsch and it exploits the aesthetics of everyday life; in both the cover and the novel it clothes, the everyday loses its everydayness. Sandeep's life becomes


OXFORD
D. H. Lawrence and 'Difference'
Postcoloniality and the Poetry of the Present
Amit Chaudhuri
With a foreword by Tom Paulin

Amit Chaudhuri

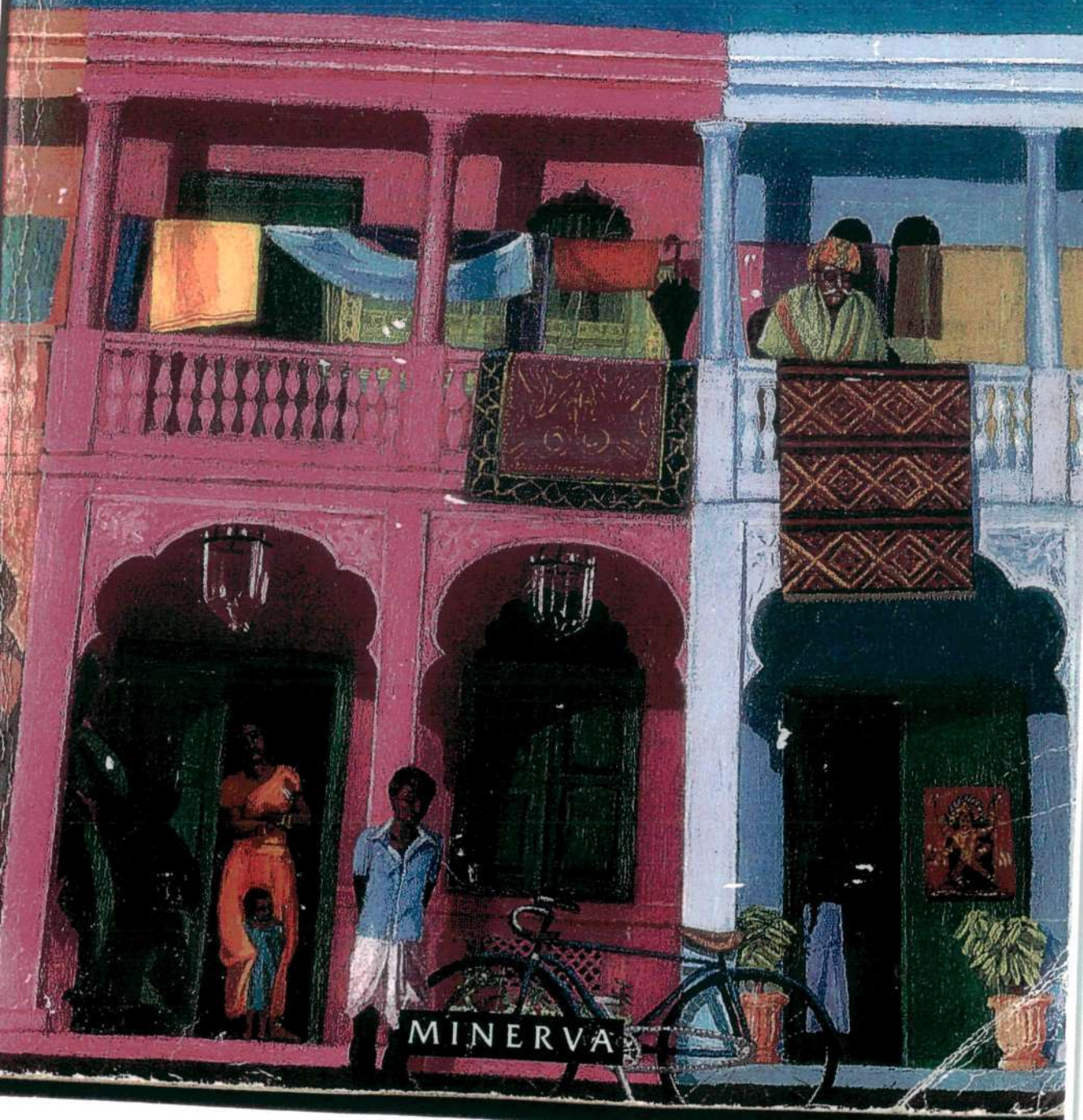
'It is impossible to do justice to the beauty of his prose'

Sunday Telegraph

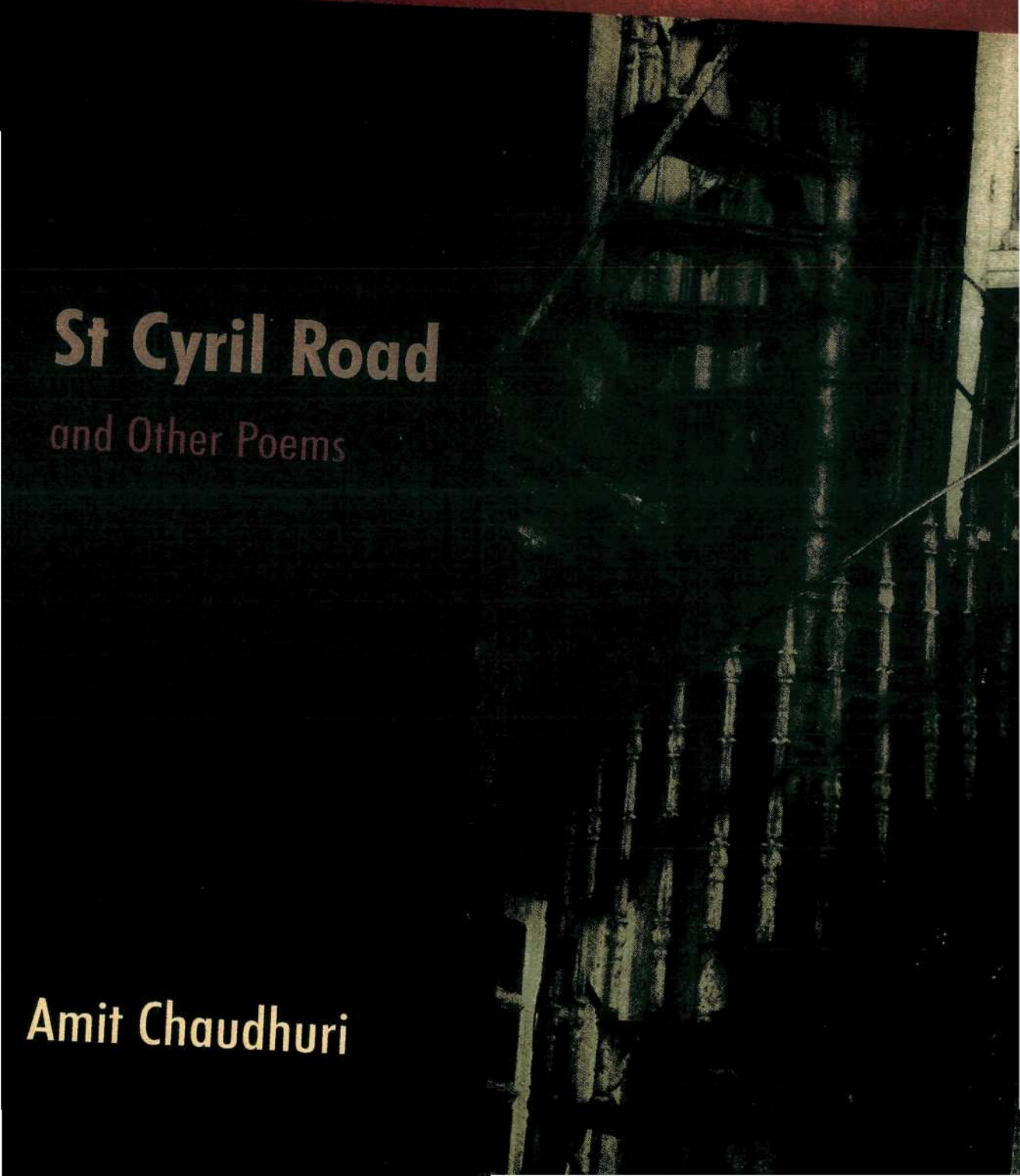
A Strange and Sublime Address

Amit Chaudhuri

Winner of the Betty Trask Award



PENGUIN POETRY



St Cyril Road

and Other Poems

Amit Chaudhuri

extraordinary because it is, like the illustration of everyday life, taken out of the context of day-to-day living and put into an artistic context, like Cartier Bresson's pictures, becoming an object of wonder.

What these covers share, then, are, primarily, two things: the first is the affinity for blue. Apart from *St. Cyril Road and Other Poems*, *Real Time* and *Small Orange Flags*, the covers of all of Chaudhuri's books are in some shade of blue. Chaudhuri, who shares similarities with Cezanne's visual vocabulary ("Evening had a light – ash-grey or blue," says Chaudhuri in "Winter Poem, 1990", 33), can, then, be read through the painter's aesthetic – "For him (Cezanne), light was orange, shade was blue."[156] The other point of similarity is the choice of a trope to denote transience, impermanence and the ephemeral, the child of a moment: the clothes left to dry will be taken off the wires (*A Strange and Sublime Address*); the water droplets on glass will dry (*Afternoon Raag*); the wall graffiti will be removed or replaced by a new one (*Freedom Song*); the colour of the mehendi will not last long (*A New World*); the man will wake up from his dream (*Real Time*); the river might change its course or dry up (*Lawrence and 'Difference'*); and the staircase, on the cover of *St. Cyril Road and Other Poems*, which can be best described with a line from Chaudhuri's poem, "simple and homeless, and without an ending" ("Winter Poem, 1990", *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 45), is for transit, for temporary passages, not wholehearted stops. They are meant to be permanently temporary, thus proving that they are the right optic for the books of a writer whose website is "permanently under construction".

[156] Frank Elgar, *Cezanne*, (London: Book Club Associates, 1975), 242.

"I send you this poem": The optic and the codes of exchange in Chaudhuri's poems

I *send* you this poem. (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 18; italics mine)

Chaudhuri's "self-discovery as a writer", in what he notices, retrospectively, as the move from Malabar Hill and Nariman Point (where he had "grown up, somewhat unhappily, in the corporate world his father worked in") to "the discovery of the lane and Bandra during my holidays was a discovery of a secret city within a city" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, ix) is similar to Monet's discovery of his special garden at Giverny, or Cezanne's of the Gardanne houses and the provincial life of Aix; or what Robert Lowell, in *Life Studies*, called the "breakthrough back into life".[157] I mention these artists in the same breath because all of them are bound, in ways big and small, to Chaudhuri's aesthetic in his poetry. In his poems, one is aware, though never transparently, of the happy coexistence of traditions, the European modernists, and their contemporaries in Bengal, Rabindranath Tagore, Jamini Roy, among others. This awareness comes primarily through the optic: his poems reveal battles of resistance and surrender to these different traditions and, at the same time, a process of exchange which brings the 'new' into being.

I will begin with a poem in which the notion of this 'exchange', this business between cultures, is codified.

The first poem of the collection makes evident the poet's focus on the visual:

---

[157] See James Longenbach, *Modern poetry after Modernism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5.

And my father was a student back in the Fifties,
in London (*picture* in overcoat and tie
and casual umbrella) ... ("The Village", *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 3; italics mine)

This is the first of a series of 'pictures', the opening 'shot' of what could be a short film; this village, however, is not a Rayesque Nischindipur, but "Hampstead Heath", a 'picture' of which Chaudhuri, like the "friend's mother", 'paints attently'. The 'colouring' words which follow are like insubstantial (in the sense of lacking material substance) water colours – "foggy" paradise, the "grey, washed London lanes".
What is important to an understanding of the poem – besides the exposition of different routes taken by things of colour, both people and paintings – are the twin acts of painting that are unravelled before the reader's eyes: by the "Swiss lady" and Chaudhuri. Are their techniques similar? And is Chaudhuri's "picture" ("I can picture ..." *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 4) a 'true' copy of the Swiss woman's painting?

The Swiss lady looks at Hampstead Heath in front of her and paints it in, what can be deduced from the poet's description as, an impressionistic style. The movement of her work, then, is from the "uncreated" on the canvas to "something grew complete" (Chaudhuri uses these words in a different context in the poem, to talk about the poetic persona's mental "picture" of his parents). Chaudhuri's 'picturising' process moves in the reverse direction, from the sum to an analysis of its parts, from the painting "hanging upon the wall inside my room" to the "ochre background" and the "two white, two grey" clouds and then, to "the Heath", first moving backwards, temporally, and then from top to bottom, from the clouds to the ground.

It hangs upon the wall inside my room ...
It's painted on an ochre background. Two white, two grey
afterthoughts are clouds or a mass of clouds.
Below this, there's the Heath, but to those people
who *haven't seen* the Heath (as once I hadn't),
it *looks* like a village, the kind of village Rip

Van Winkle must have returned to when he woke. (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 3; italics mine)

It is not just the backward movement from painted canvas to easel, or "finished" product to raw material, but the other journeys, from the "wall inside my room" to "the Heath", and more importantly, from sight or sighting (on "the wall inside my room") to a noted absence of another perspective ("who haven't seen the Heath"). It is, as if, the painting is, by itself, incomplete unless annotated by an awareness of the 'real' Heath ("the real thing") and this sets up a binary in the reading of the poem, and the painting. This is, for me, the most important opposition in the poem, one among the many (is-was; painting-Heath; "uncreated"-"complete"; "walking"-"painting"; even the father & mother-I) that create the architectonics of the poem: it is the 'difference' between someone who looks at the painting through this poem and one who has seen both, the painting and its inspiration (where the poetic persona has the privilege of greater knowledge). And in this opposition lies a slippage – the reader has possibly seen neither, the painting or the heath (even if s/he lives near Hampstead Heath), and this leads to a sense of the poem being merely a trace of the painting, which might have been the motive of the poet.

Does the poem, then, merely mean to "show"? This is a question that the poem begs, for metaphors of 'seeing' punctuate the gradual process of revelation in the poem – "picture" (two times), "imagine" (to imagine is, of course, to see), "painted" (two times), "seen", "looks", "defined", "visible", "clarity", "enframed", "see".

"The English delight in landscape is a delight in escape," says Lawrence.[158] Chaudhuri's poem is only partly about the young "boy's" delight in escape (the mention of "Rip Van Winkle" adds to the sense of flight from the humdrum); it is more about the process of creation, not just its aesthetics but also its politics, about what Elizabeth Bishop called the "perpetually changing integration of what has been written with what is being written".[159] The poem is about this constantly changing process of representation, where the painting ("what has been written") and Chaudhuri's poem ("what is being written") engage in

[158] D.H. Lawrence, *Selected Essays*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1969), 319.
[159] James Longenbach, *Modern poetry after Modernism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 24.

fluid interplay, so that the painting becomes not just a finished object hanging on a wall but a work of art whose character changes with the words in the poem.

The impulse to be a part of this process of composition and represent it at the same time produces an absence (the important in Chaudhuri's works, most often, lives as an absence) – this is the absence of any viewer besides the "I" at the moment of composition of the poem, a fact that is thrown into relief by the presence of the parents during the painting of the heath. This very cleverly throws up the question of audience – whom did the European woman paint for? (It was a gift given to the parents "on an eventless day in the Fifties".) And who is this poem being written for? The painting was gifted to two people who had "seen" the Heath ("the real thing") while the poem is for people who neither know the painting nor, possibly, the Heath. This is not an answer to the tired question of 'intended reader/viewer' but something more important, a post-colonial writer's refashioning and remaking of traditions.

Neither the poet nor the poetic persona (they might be one and the same person) lays claim on the Heath; their claim is not on the land but on the painting, a tradition (European tradition here, represented by the "Swiss lady"). This painting is, very importantly, a "gift", a gift made available and possible because of a journey, from the colony to the "centre" (I use this word in the sense Eliot used it in "What is a Classic?"). This physical journey by two people from India spurred on another journey – the journey of the painting, the canvas, from England to India, where it hangs on a wall. It is these two journeys which have produced this poem which, in turn, has become a site of the interaction of two traditions: the post-colonial poet's commentary on this piece of European art to produce a new work of art belongs, obliquely, to the same tradition as Coetzee's *Foe* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the rich equation where the 'foreigner' claims something old, an island, a house, a name or a tradition, to produce something new, but only as new as newly grown hair that sprouts from the same root (In the poem "The Steamer", there are two journeys as well: King George V and Queen Mary have made their journey from England to Bombay, the coloniser's journey; seventy five years later, "we" make their journey, not to England, but into the sea, returning from

which they remember, but cannot see, this piece of history in stone, a perfect trope for post-colonial encounters in which traces of others survive, but not necessarily, as Chaudhuri has claimed time and again, as otherness.) In Chaudhuri, this is the claim to a tradition, to a particular strain of British modernism while, at the same time, remaining in the ambit of a parent culture ("back to India"; "As a boy, that scene, enframed,/ *was*, for me, England. In a way, *it still is*." *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 3, 4; italics mine). And such claim, as always, is imbued with quarrels: Lawrence, writing about the tradition of English landscape painting wrote, "It is not confronted with any living, procreative body";[160] Chaudhuri moves from the painting of the landscape to "the warm, freckled hands" that painted it and this movement backwards in time becomes a move away from the British tradition that Lawrence was writing about, so that it becomes an inner struggle as full of possibility as the tussle between the optics to resolve whether the subject of the painting is a heath or a village ("the Heath ... looks like a village").

There is something else in the poem that links it to an early European modernist tradition and it is the similarity with the aesthetic of Cezanne, the father of European modernist painting. I will show, during the course of the chapter, how Cezanne's evolution as a painter is mirrored by the evolution of the optic in Chaudhuri's poetry. Here I would like to point out one of the characteristics of Cezanne's aesthetic operational in the first poem of the collection: it is the recurrence of the rhetoric of absence.

A few lines into the poem and the reader is aware of the sense of an absence, an "uncreated", and then the memory of an absence ("as once I hadn't"), a loss ("a lost church"). These are followed by a sense of emptiness that the gap between the probable and the possible creates, the silence between 'this or that or ...': "This could be a day in autumn ... or a day in summer ... or a brightish day in winter"; and then a mild certainty, denoted by a negative, "It's *not* spring", ending with, again, an absence, an "*unstruck* church bell" (italics mine). This strain is again visible, later, in "St Cyril Road Sequence" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 9-13) – "I *can't see* them", says the "I", of the "workmen delving the road", and immediately proceeds to imagine ("I think of their silhouettes") in metaphors of light ("silhouettes"). And, once again, as in Cezanne, the

[160] D.H. Lawrence, *Selected Essays*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1969), 319.

rhetoric of loss, the sense of something that could have been – "each wakeful image ... is a constant *loss* of itself"; "a dark *centreless* well"; even "the lonely road crumbles before my eyes" (for crumbling is loss, at least a loss of structure); "the vanished divisions of a shut fan";

In "St. Cyril Road, Bombay", the next poem in the collection, the dominant tone is anthropological - "minority", "barbarians", "larger faith", "Asians", "Englishman", "Christian minority", "cosmopolitan", "rootless", "dismembered", "branches of faith", "Hindu", "Portuguese" – something that is quite uncharacteristic of Chaudhuri. And yet it is not the sociological tropes that create the scaffolding of the poem, but the optic. Sets of binaries are created, through the repetition of the presence-absence pair of light-no light (not always equated with darkness):

> noon is a charged battery, and evening's a visionary gloom;

and

> streets ogling with fat lights ... the sun-forgotten darkness.

It has often been said that the Impressionists discovered light. The second poem of this chronologically arranged collection shows Chaudhuri's early affinities with this strain of modernism. "Evening's a visionary gloom" would be a perfect description of Manet's *Boulogne Harbour by Moonlight* (1869). And Chaudhuri, like Cezanne, began his career as an impressionist. But both, the painter and the poet, soon learned that light could not be all. After Impressionism had taught Cezanne that light is the chief generator of colour, he discovered that light is likewise the main basis for balance and harmony in a painting, which was something the Impressionists, who squandered their energies on analysis of the motif and the breakdown of local tones, were never able to achieve.

"The Bandra Medical Store" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 7-8) begins with Cezannean absences: "I had *no idea* whatsoever/ where the Bandra Medical Store really was"; "... to a place I *hadn't seen*"; "Two roads followed each other/ like long *absences*"; "The air smelled of something *not there*" (italics mine). This is Lawrence on

Cezanne: "He seems to be saying... Landscape is not like this and not like this and not like this and not ...etc. – and every not is a little blank on the canvas, defined by the remains of an assertion. Sometimes Cezanne builds up a landscape essentially out of omissions".[161]

And, after this, a visual construction, almost completely in terms of light:

"purled and knitted *shadows*"; "little craggy *outline* of stone"; "*heliotropic* rubbish-heaps, elderly white houses"; "*dusk*-sough like winged, palaeolithic moths eddying towards the *closing eye of the sun*"; "motionless gestures scrawled on a *darkening* fresco"; "sunset" (italics mine). In "St Cyril Road (ii)", the section "Evening" is completely, and quite justifiably, constructed in contours of light (the word "evening", itself, is a construction in half-light):

> But beyond this *lintel-slender* lane,
> Surprising as a *sliver of sunlight* between curtains, faint
> As a *yellow route of light* no one dare tread on,
> are the larger roads that course
> like dark honey out of a honeycomb towards *traffic lights*, wheeling intersections,
> and all is a carnival.
> At *sunset*, they say it's, do you
> know, they say it's the 'peak hour', and the cars
> swim like red or silver fish past the junctions,
> and the *lights* shudder on in shops, recreating *golden*
> afternoon.
> But in this lane, the *light* of the sun goes out, and
> little islands of *fluorescence shine* in the rooms behind windows,
> and pigeons stop quarrelling and mating, or mating and quarrelling,
> and a mathematical progression of birds and insects
> dissolve into their *imprecise, unlit shadows*...
> the levelling
> of *shadows into shadows* ... (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 10-11; italics mine)

---

[161] Ibid., 342.

This section, it is obvious, is, following the Impressionists, a composition in light, like Manet's *The Harbour at Bordeaux* (1871). But what is of greater interest are the words employed to construct this optic – "faint as a yellow route of light"; "wheeling intersections"; "lights shudder"; "fluorescence"; "dissolve"; "imprecise, unlit shadows"; "the levelling of shadows into shadows". In the following sections, "sundry shadows and gestures marry", there is "a mimicry of shadows", Christians are "dedicated to the cause of being obscure", "the stars blinked ... a surface of melting glass". All of these are or could be the semiotic to denote Impressionism, the moving world, the mutable world captured for a moment, where the object and its shadow are almost indiscernible from each other, as in Monet's *The Fourteenth of July, Bastille Day*, (1877).

The same tendency continues in the next section of the poem, "Sunday", where the "mist *ripples* back", "the slow-flowering steam *wavers*" from the coffee-cup, "the *fine, too-delicate crumbs* rain on the earth", almost immediately, recalls Monet's *Bathers at La Grenouillere* (1869) where the entire scene is constructed by "delicate crumbs" of paint, the Monet of whom Cezanne is supposed to have said, "Monet is the strongest of us. He's only an eye, but, my God, what an eye!"[162]

But, at the same time, the poem marks the beginning of the appearance of planes:

> the houses look like rows of slender barley from the pilot's
> window, row pursuing row, held in a milieu of
> whiteness, unswayed by a clean, flowing wind?

In the first poem, "The Village", "Trees are smudges – like green, dark green thumbprints on paper", even "the village is a smudge"; in the third poem, the smudges, the "thumbprints", have become "rows", "row pursuing row", the first transition, reminiscent of Cezanne, again, moving from explorations with "smudges", dry colour (mixed with very little or almost no medium) to the construction of planes. In this transition, is the

[162] See Frank Elgar, *Cezanne*, (London: Book Club Associates, 1975), 49.

whole history of awareness of space, the idea of conveying the illusion of depth by means of concentric cubes or movement by curves.

Planar constructions are visible, again, in the next poem, "St Cyril Road Sequence (i)": "the gardener cuts and *piles* up grass"; "impermanent *blankets* of dust"; "the tangent *outline* of a dragonfly against a leaf"; "the vanished divisions of a fan" (the word "division" indicates the beginning of planarity); the crows "pre-*arranged* on the boughs"; "*bunched* houses"; "*lining* the lane at systematic *intervals*"; "a *mass* of *tall* coloured buildings"; "neat *rectangular* gardens"; "sleek, glowing *channels*"; "faint, *circular* ticking"; in other words, what Cezanne saw, the geometry in nature. "To see in nature the cylinder, the sphere, the cone, the whole being set into perspective so that each side of an object or plane converges on a central point. Lines running parallel to the horizon create distance ... The lines perpendicular to that horizon create depth," wrote Cezanne in his famous letter to Emile Bernard on the 15th of April 1904.[163]

The poem is interesting because it shows two traditions wrestling with one other in the poet, as they did in the early Cezanne, the Impressionists, trying to find a means to denote the mutable and Cezanne trying to find a means to denote the permanence of change, to find a spatial synthesis in which the vehicle and all it contained, stability and instability, the concrete and the imaginary, became one.

What is, also, interesting in "St. Cyril Road Sequence" is Chaudhuri's gradual adoption of what he, in talking of Lawrence's poetry, termed the "bricolage model", so that the inanimate, even something like light, takes on an anthropological character. "The cars swim like red or silver fish past the junctions"; "the mist ripples back to the unexpected roofs like a flock of endless, white gulls"; "the leaves a parrot green"; "the bruised bungalows squat with a wild beard of grass"; "houses come down on all fours"; "a swift badge of flame open and shut like a hot mouth". In "The Gold Rush", "a small man ... changes into a chicken" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 50). Just as the similarity with

[163] Ibid., 104.

Cezanne is, in all likelihood, unconscious, this tendency to assign a living character to things that do not breathe links him to the tradition of the Surrealists, especially Dali.

There is also, in "St Cyril Road Sequence", the appearance of another optic, one that is characteristic of Chaudhuri's fiction and some of his later verse.

> I scan the lettering on those gates
> – Helen Villa, Rose Cottage ... (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 12)

"Scan the lettering": Just as the Bengali alphabets are "scanned" by a Bengali-illiterate Sandeep in *A Strange and Sublime Address*; or "Cornflakes, toast, milk" are "scanned" to reveal "the shape of these words/ on my plate" (in the poem "Education", *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 71); "chiselled and clear-cut letters, in near-perfect pentameter: 'ERECTED TO COMMEMORATE THE LANDING IN INDIA OF THEIR IMPERIAL MAJESTIES KING GEORGE V AND QUEEN MARY ON THE SECOND OF DECEMBER MCXI' ("The Steamer", *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 14-16); "Shelf mark 821 GUNN/ near Larkin, Pound, Basil Bunting, Roy Campbell, Peter Porter, U. A. Fanthorpe, T. S. Eliot" ("Memorabilia", *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 56); "OK-TATA/ OK-TATA/ HORN PLEASE", the message – INDIA IS GREAT – dissolves" ("Shards: A Narrative", *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 65); "bearing the message ... A Joke Every Day is Good for Your Health" ("The Plot for the New Novel", *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 76). This might be read not just as Chaudhuri's take on the concept of mimesis but also as his link, however mediated, with a tradition of realism.

"The Steamer", again, shows the same struggle, to find an aesthetic that could be a compromise between Impressionism and one that Cezanne was trying to develop. So, while water grows "like a *different sensibility*, dark and extraneous ... like a troubled cushion", words which are like an Impressionist's brushstrokes, like Monet's *The Boats: Regatta at Argenteuil* (1874), the island is "an impressive clump of stones, euphoniously called 'the battery'/ – a defence outpost, altered to *resemble*/ a clump of stones", the "clump of stones" recalling Cezanne's geometry and architecture; and then, "we

discerned a gun/ in a turret, *looking like* a gun in a turret", which, of course, belongs to neither of these traditions (all italics mine), but a realist school. "Different sensibility", "Resemble" and "Looking like": three traditions coming together to form a new aesthetic.

> "We were spies,
> directed to see patterns the sea hid from us.
> We did not belong here." (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 14)

Trying to look for "patterns" in hiding is the task of the viewer of an Impressionist painting. Then the "patterns" give way to "golden pods", a Cezannean shape, until it comes to rest, again, at the end of the sentence on "the horizon's extremity, a stain on a brow", a "stain", an Impressionist's last brush-stroke. This is followed by a similar impression, "afterglow", until geometry lays its claim – the horizon, which was a "stain", is now "tilted", implying, immediately its existence in and through a plane. This is like the early Cezanne at work, the irresolvability of opposites, for "tilted" is followed by "the blurred ocean bed" (as in Monet, *Storm: Rocks at Belle-Ile*, 1886) and "wrinkled web", "transparent hand", again to be claimed by Cezanne's geometry, "creases of water".[164] These opposite claims continue throughout the poem – the Impressionist "damask broodingness of evening" trailed by, what can be seen as optical representations of these different traditions, the sun "half-way down" and the clear moon appearing together, like "two eyes dividing a single face" ("dividing" is a common Cezanne semiotic). And then the absence – "And on the other side/ of the Gateway, the side we couldn't see…". "The Steamer" might seem a strange name but the importance of the optic is underscored by the fact that all that is described is viewed from the steamer. It is, after all, the steamer's "perspective" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 15) which makes the landscape become simply a symphony of moving shapes, leading the spectator by slow stages to the heart of the geological drama, the geology in the sea and the geology of the stone inscription.

[164] This reminds us of one of his paintings, *Still-life with Curtain*, 1895-1900, where the strokes used to paint the "creases" of the table cloth are exactly the same used to paint *Rocks and Trees at Bibemus*, 1900-4.

In "Letter from the Hills" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 17-18), the primary impulse is still impressionist – "headlights streaming in the morning-mist's dragnet"; "the leaves peer out, shivering"; "delicate as flecks of dried paint on a wet, just-begun painting"; "a speck of dust hanging in a vertical wall of light"; "halos of steam and cold vapour"; "tremulous dewdrop". At the same time, however, there is a trace of the appearance of planes on the canvas – "Vertical"; "escarpment"; "gorge"; and an absence ("its patch of nothingness"). In "Convalescence" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 19), the same trope, used differently, reveals two schools of painting: the impressionist strain in "watching the minute dust falling like a shy, delicate mist"; and Cezanne's, whose quest was to find an aesthetic for the permanently changing nature of things, in "as motionless as the dust lies on the tables and chairs". In "Words for Music" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 20-21), the lake is "like a bowl tipping with light", the life beneath the boulder roams "like shadows in a cathedral", as if on an Impressionist's canvas, until in the end, the "you" "arc(s) away in an immaculate orbit, as the spinning earth veers its face from the sun, hides behind darkness", and the "orbit" and the "spinning earth" arrive to lay the claims of geometry, as they did in Cezanne. The many movements apparent in these lines of the poem are like the lines in Cezanne's landscapes which, in spite of the definite geometric lines, do not suggest a motionless world. Rather, they show a world which moves and expands, bursting with energy, sensitive and subjective, searching for a spatial synthesis in which the vehicle and all it contained, stability and instability, the concrete and the imaginary, became one.

In the poem "Afternoon Raag" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 22-24), "light and rain revolve the landscape in a shifting treadmill of shadow", the "clear, cool space flowing in and out of a listlessness, is something liquid and grieving", something "that cannot tolerate its own shimmering presence", "it melts away from itself all the time", the singing teacher is a "shadow against the sofa", which seems almost a transliteration of *The Absinthe Drinker* (1858-9) by Monet.

The poems in Part Two are sparing in tone and the tendency to rely on impressionistic touches to fill the canvas in rarely seen, though it has not yet completely disappeared ("I

saw a faint glitter on the lake," he says in "Winter Poem, 1990"). In "Song" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 32), the "window" is "a square of light", and "shadows and sleep" are buried "deep below the earth". Like Cezanne who created mass and depth by using contrasts between cold and warm tones, carrying them to their highest degree of saturation, Chaudhuri contrasts the warm "square of light" in the window with the cold "shadows and sleep" buried "deep below the earth".

In "Dusk in the Veranda" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 34), "light (is) contained in a glass of water", the curtains are parted, in our minds at least, into long triangles, and dusk is, first, seen on the "veranda", a rectangular structure and, then, through "a window", another rectangular frame. In "Frost on a Mercedes-Benz" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 35), too, it is geometry that defines the optic – "silvery, polished, million-starry-eyed"; and there is, once again, absence – "the road, ordinary; ourselves, absent". "Martin Building, Oxford" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 36), which brings some of Cezanne's series on Jas de Bouffan paintings (1876-77) to mind, employs the technique of "Poussinesque": "The sunlight lies upon the polished table on the grass" (table, a rectangular plane); "The sun makes space, in which that bird, unseen, lives" (unseen, the absent, the recurring trope).

In spite of the "mid-morning light on the houses" in "After Rain" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 41), what remains "impressed" on the mind are the "dark tyre-tracks impressed on the wet/ and lengthening road". This, the thick marks of the tyre, in the second-last poem in Part Two, marks the beginning of Chaudhuri's search for a new form, something that would let him accommodate his affinities with the two strains of European modernism, as represented by the Impressionists and Cezanne and his followers, and yet allow him to 'paint' a landscape (in all senses of the word) in a form (and technique) that was closer home, close to the subjects of his poetry.

As one moves through the poems in Part Three, one is aware of a gradual fading out of an Impressionist's dabs of colour, the lines are sparse, (like the poems); the tendency to see things in terms of geometrical structures remain, but that is, often, qualified by the need

to see things in their essence, through minimalist strokes. This is similar to the late Cezanne, the Cezanne of the water-colours, where the eye is allowed to move freely, where the paintings, like Chaudhuri's poems, are a mixture of elisions, ellipses, pauses and repetitions, where fullness is achieved through emptiness, balance through imbalance, continuity through discontinuity, where the laxity of the Impressionists have been transformed into the conciseness of Japanese art in Cezanne, and of the bold, minimalist strokes of Jamini Roy in Chaudhuri.

In "Lethe" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 47), the "full circle", the only optic in the poem, making its appearance in the last line almost as an afterthought, the "circle" is both Cezanne's and Roy's. In "Cordless" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 48), the "small polished object", again the only real visual, is offered as the only description of the "cordless" phone; it is, as if, all other ornamentation except a small rectangle of shining black would be redundant. In "Residential", Chaudhuri's visual vocabulary is, once again, muted – there is "the pleasure of glimpsing other people's lives/ in their rectangles opening out onto light" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 51); this is the only visual trope in the poem and it is like re-visiting Cezanne, the "rectangles opening out into light" almost literally recalling Cezanne's *Road at Chantilly* (1888).

In "Morola Fry", however, the alignment with Cezanne is more pronounced. It is necessary to quote the short poem in its entirety to make my point clear.

> These small freshwater fish
> that are eaten whole – head, tail,
> backbone, not to speak of the flesh,
> are fried in hot oil,
> four or five held together
> in a binding of chopped onions and flour
> which apparently sews them together into islands
> from which their crowded eyes stare like jewels. (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 55)

The poem is, it is worth noting, one long sentence; not one long stroke, however, filling a canvas, but as always, in Chaudhuri (and Cezanne; and later the pointillists, who developed this after Cezanne, with whom Chaudhuri, especially in his fiction, shows similarities in technique), broken lines and planes, adding to the sense of a whole. The two "which", in the last two lines of the poem, set up, what has been called in Cezanne, as "binocular vision". The "islands", as they are seen from above the wok, and the "stare" of the "crowded eyes" inside the wok.

In "'He Is the Man of Your Heart' Rabindranath Tagore" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 59), Chaudhuri asks, "Why do you keep him waiting at the eye's doorway?", as if almost asking himself. For "the eye's doorway" is a necessary and important commentary of the style of painting that Tagore himself developed. Chaudhuri, therefore, shows a shift in his adoption of a style (and a discourse) that was closer to the subject-matter that he was dealing with. "After Sun" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 60), a poem which is expected to be a study in light, employs no visual. One would expect it to be a companion piece to "Dusk in the Veranda" (Part Two) but that it is not. It is, as if, the optic is gradually becoming unnecessary to Chaudhuri's semiotic. In "'Sometimes the Postman'" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 68), also, there is no exercise of the eye. Though the poem succeeds in creating a sense of place, visually, it is born out of something else, of the affection for the distant: it is catalogued without word-pictures, making it both, the siren's song and the "I's" personal, often seasonal, battles, of resistance and surrender. The letter is a very important trope in Chaudhuri (*Afternoon Raag*); "'Sometimes the Postman'" is an ode, not just to the anonymous carrier of news (as in the Bengali poem, "Runner") and its allied charm of possibilities but an ode to distance, the distance that is portrayed, as often in Cezanne, by blank parts in a canvas.

The next poem in this section, "Cloudburst" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 69), has a hybrid muse – while "the film of sweat on your throat", the "street lights in a lane", and the "electric light in a porch" are reminiscent of the Impressionists, the "inky movement of palm leaves" recalls artists from Bengal in the early and middle twentieth century, like Nandalal Bose, for example. "Histories of Stone" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 73),

however, recalls, almost completely, Cezanne: Diana's "one long leg crossed over the other" is similar to Cezanne's famous series on Madame Cezanne. Although Cezanne abandoned verisimilitude, he did not move away from the truth. In his paintings of Madame Cezanne (1890-4), the lines are no longer vertical, the shapes bend, the model seems unsteady, and the arms are elongated out of all proportion and meet at the bottom of the canvas. The model, in Cezanne, is no longer placed in the enclosed space as in Renaissance paintings, but in an open space, as is Diana in Chaudhuri's poem, against the background of the Taj Mahal; only the crossed hand, made almost abnormally long, to replicate the spectator's experience, is replaced, in Chaudhuri's poem, with the crossed leg. "The minarets", also "stand in symmetry" while "Mumtaz Mahal's dome hovers above our heads", the minarets and the dome, again, becoming cylinders and circles, Cezanne's semiotic. In the next poem, "A Brooklyn Jew in Gaza" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 74), the only visual is a piece of geometric construction, "the long promontory of Manhattan".

"Shards: A Narrative" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 61-67) resembles what Elizabeth Bishop, writing about the kind of novel she had wanted to write, called "something like a bramble bush"[165] for these are poems that seem to be in motion, poems able to accommodate a jumble of observations.[166] As in the poem, "A Bust" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 75) –

> I saw it while drifting off to sleep:
> not a figurine, but a bust –
> the shoulders covered by a barber's white cloth,
> the chair on which he sat in a saloon
> in a strangely typical small town
> a head of wavy, greying hair, but the face
> quite young, not unkind or brusque,
> the eyes unconfrontational, undemanding,
> probably viewing (without impatience) the present

[165] James Longenbach, *Modern poetry after Modernism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 24.
[166] Ibid., 25.

or even himself in the mirror

– Bishop's parable, equating the poet and his poem with a marksman and his target, seems to apply.

The poet is set on bringing down onto the paper his poem, which occurs to him not as a sudden fixed apparition of a poem, but as a moving, changing idea or a series of ideas ... [T]he target is a moving target and the marksman is also moving.[167]

For in both the poems, "Shards: A Narrative" and "A Bust", "not only is the stuff of the poem in motion, so is the process by which that stuff is apprehended and then given the illusion of closure and coherence". The word "narrative" is telling: the self-revisionist process of a mind thinking is evident in both the poems for the different narratives in "Shards" and the succeeding lines in "A Bust" adding and correcting the impression of the "bust" are described, optically, as things in motion, in flux where uncertainty of 'exact' knowledge risks their position as one more prone to mutability.

The last section of the poem, with the room seen through the perspective of the lizard, could well have been written by Cezanne:

> All the dimensions of a room are different for a lizard;
> a wall's a floor; down is up;
> even *space is altered.*
> Sometimes I wonder if it's the same room.
> There it is, disregarding
> the law of gravity
> and, stuck to the ceiling,
> outwaiting its long journey of hunger. (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 67; italics mine)

[167] Ibid., 25.

Space in Cezanne's work excludes the notions of distance, emptiness or fullness, of metric measurement or depth. Forms which in nature are spread out horizontally are here rearranged on a single vertical plane by a mind whose concern is to gauge purely abstract dimensional relationships. This 'pictorial' space, as in the extract from the poem above, becomes, as in Cezanne, a plastic element of his own invention.

Like the modernist painters, (Matisse and Picasso, for example, who quoted each other's work, a sculpture or a part of a painting, in their paintings), Chaudhuri often quotes extracts from paintings and films, either quoting them ad verbatim or paraphrasing them. "The Village" is, itself, about a painting of a heath confused, optically, as a village; "Bombay, (is) like Manhattan painted on a jar" ("The Steamer", *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 15); "I once saw, on film, reindeer migrating past/ a cold tract of land. Their swarming eyes kindled/ into torches. Their bodies formed a galloping mist/ that shrouded the earth." ("Letter from the Hills", *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 17);"five identical screens, repeating/ the image of a man coming up to bowl/ while another man swings a bat by floodlight" ("Shards: A Narrative", *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 62); "And Chaplin sitting on a stool/ his head resting upon his cane/ the folds of his crumpled suit/ all clear and involved; his face/ under his hat unusually calm/ and serious; how it becomes/ the still point in the confusion,/ this figure sitting in the traffic" ("Shards: A Narrative", *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 65)

Chaudhuri, like Cezanne, faithfully reproduces a particular colour in a particular place, but never allows it to be fragmented, as the Impressionists did, by the action of the sun's rays. For Cezanne, and this is obvious in Chaudhuri's poems as well, light is born of colour ("Like a film of dust that's absorbed the seven colours," *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 10), as is form. Colour, formerly enclosed by the outline, now overflows it and links up with the adjacent colours, thus replacing the atmosphere of the *tenebrosi* and the luminists by another atmosphere composed of subtle interchanges, of chromatic affinities, of gradations and contrasts. Like Cezanne, Chaudhuri uses colour to draw and paint at the same time. In "The Village", the colours used are "ochre", "white", "grey", "green"; "black" in "The Bandra Medical Store"); "like a film of dust/ that's absorbed the seven

colours", "swim like red or silver fish past the junctions", "white gulls", "the leaves a parrot green" ("St Cyril Road Sequence"); "black-and-yellow beetles" ("Letter from the Hills"); "gauze of green from our too-human eyes", "a green badge" ("Words for Music"). In "Going for a Drive", "Leaves – wrinkled, yellow tongues – pastiche/ the driveway by habit". "For him," says Frank Elgar of Cezanne, "light was orange, shade was blue".[168] In "Winter Poem, 1990", "evening had a light – ash-grey or blue" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 33); the cheeks are "clean-shaven, heavenly, deep unearthly green" ("Old Spice"); "Some girl" wears "blue denim jeans and t-shirt..." ("Autobiography"). Although Cezanne discovered the merits of geometrical simplification, he also invented a light within the painting which is subjective and haphazard, and as different from natural light as mind is from matter. "Light," he was later to say, "is something that cannot be reproduced. It must be represented by something else, by colour for instance."[169] That is why the "wasp ...(is) body tea-coloured"; the "collected works of Sharat Chandra, (have) gold lettering on the spine" ("A Wasp"); "And the mud-like stain on the toilet/ paper I'd scrape my backside with/ and consult daily: dark yellow,/ unlike the pale shit I'd seen left/ in the toilets by the English boys" ("Education"); "Apples ... pale pink in crates" ("'Apples Still Come from Kashmir'"); "Eleven men in indigo and blue/ as colourful as the fox in the fable" ("Shards: A Narrative"). "In 1904, he (Cezanne) said to Emile Bernard: 'Nature, for us, is more depth than surface, and hence the need to bring into our light vibrations, which are represented by reds and yellows, a sufficient quantity of bluishness to make the air felt".[170]

The first poem of the collection, "The Village", showed how the idea of travel was linked to the birth of a 'new' kind of art; by the time the reader comes to the second last poem of the collection, "The Bidet" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 77), there has been another journey, by two other Indians, not the writer's parents but his "uncle and aunt", not to England but to another continent, North America. And another kind of sighting: this is

[168] Frank Elgar, *Cezanne*, (London: Book Club Associates, 1975), 242.
[169] Ibid., 133.
[170] Ibid., 242.

neither the "real" Heath nor the painting that depicted it but something else, something completely unrecognisable. The locations where these sightings are made are also different: Hampstead Heath and the wall in the "I's" room in India have given way to the toilet in "my cousin's mansion in California". In "The Village", the viewer was confused whether the subject of the painting was a Heath or a village; in this poem, the two toilet-tourists are ignorant:

> At first, they didn't know what it was –
> neither basin nor commode
> neither bowl nor bathtub
> they circled round it anxiously
> and silently.
> Could it be a drinking-water fountain?

The repetition of "neither-nor" is, here, not just a Cezannean absence. It is a commentary on loss, on how travel is no longer charged with the potential to create newness. For the "new" is only a discovery ("Later, when they knew …") these days, not an invention as it was "in the Fifties" and even later, when the young "boy" could imagine "England" through that painting. What this strange thing in the toilet is, is mentioned nowhere in the poem, not in the dense tissue of non-descriptions, nowhere except in the title. It's a "bidet", incapable of creating newness, only the initial sense of surprise ("it surprised their secret regions"). Chaudhuri is not just criticising the existential disorder of modern day travel; he seems to be saying that in this globalised world, where the 'outside' has been almost completely killed, the possibility of the creation of new art and new forms through the encounter and interaction between cultures has also been killed. The openness of the Heath has been replaced by the enclosed space of the toilet. That age, when cultures were catalysts in the creation of art forms, is no more. But all is not lost. For the "bidet" may be the result of 'art' (the "bidet" is art in scare quotes) in the age of mechanical reproduction, but this poem is also the result of that journey. For Chaudhuri is one of the few poets writing today, whose appropriations, affinities and oppositional poetics continue to produce, to quote from one of his poems, "Second Cousins" (*St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, 49), "something wholly and unexpectedly new".

Bibliography

Achaya, K.T.. 1998. *Indian Food: A Historical Companion.* Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Achaya, K.T.. 2002. *A Historical Dictionary of Indian Food.* Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Acker, Kathy. 1997. *Bodies of Work*: *Essays.* London. New York: Serpent's Tail.

Banerji, Chitrita 2001. *The Hour of The Goddess: Memories of Women, Food and Ritual in Bengal*. Calcutta: Seagull books.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1984. *Rabelais and his World.* trans. Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington : Indiana University Press.

Barnstone, Willis 1995. *The Poetics of Translation: History, Theory, Practice* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Barthes, Roland. 1993. *Mythologies*. Selected and translated from the French by Annette Lavers. London: Vintage.

Barthes, Roland. 1994. *The Semiotic Challenge*. London. California : University of California Press.

Barthes, Roland 1975. *S/Z.* Hill & Wang

Basu, Prabhat & Mohendranath Dutta. 1959. *Chhotoder Chora Sanchayan*. Calcutta: Sishu Sahitya Sansad Pvt Ltd.

Basu, Samaresh. 2003. *Prajapati,* Kolkata: Ananda Publishers Private Limited.

Bhabha, Homi 1994. *The Location of Culture* London: Routledge.

Bhattacharya, France 1985. 'Food Rituals in the Chandimangala', trans. Radha Sharma, *India International Centre Quarterly*, vol. 12, no. 2.

Chatterjee, Ratnabali 1987. "'The Original Jamini Roy': A Study in the Consumerism of Art" *Social Scientist*, v 15, no. 164, Jan, 3-18.

Chaudhuri, Amit 1992. *A Strange and Sublime Address*. London : Minerva.

1998. *Afternoon Raag*. London : Vintage.

1998. *Freedom Song*. London : Picador.

2000. *A New World*. London : Picador.

2001. *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature.* London: Picador

2002. *Real Time. Stories and a Reminiscence*. London : Picador.

2002. 'Poles of Recovery: From Dutt to Chaudhuri' *Interventions* Vol. 4 (1) 89-105.

2003. *D.H. Lawrence and 'Difference': Postcoloniality and the Poetry of the Present*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

2003. "The Moor's Legacy: The Random Sources of Renewal", *The Telegraph* November 16

2007. "Inner Tension", *The Times of India*, 17th March

Chaudhuri, Sukanta 2002. 'Translation and Displacement: The Life and Works of Pierre Menard', *Journal of Contemporary Thought*, 15 (Summer), 37-45.

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

Dasgupta, Samir. 2001. *Shukhadyer Sandhane*. Kolkata: Subarnarekha.

Deleuze, Gilles & Guattari, Felix. 1996. *A Thousand Plateaus*. London: The Athlone Press.

Deleuze, Gilles & Felix Guattari, 1986. *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Derrida, Jacques 1998. *Dissemination, Monolingualism of the Other: or the Prosthesis of Origin* Stanford University Press.

Derrida, Jacques 1981. *Positions* trans. Alan Bass University of Chicago Press.

Dutta, Sandeep 2000. *Slanguage*. Kolkata: Kolikata Little Magazine Library O Gabeshana Kendra.

Eco, Umberto 1976. *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Eco,Umberto 1999. *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition* London: Secker & Warburg.

Elgar, Frank 1975. *Cezanne*, London: Book Club Associates.

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

Foucault, Michel 1974. *The Archaeology of Knowledge* London: Tavistock.

Genette, Gerard. 1982. *Figures of Literary Discourse*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

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

Ghosh, Sumana R.. 2004. "Aalap: In conversation with Amit Chaudhuri" in Anu Shukla and S. B. Shukla (ed.) *The Novels of Amit Chaudhuri : An Exploration in the Alternative Tradition*. Delhi: Swarup and Sons.

Gilroy, Paul 1993. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Routledge.

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

Hall, Stuart 1977. 'Culture, the Media and the "Ideological Effect"', in *Mass Communication and Society* ed. James Curran, Michael Gurevitch & Janet Woollacott London: Edward Arnold

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

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

Kelly, Veronica & Dorothea E. Von Mucke, 1994. *Body and Text in the Eighteenth Century* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Labov, William 1973. *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular* University of Pennysylvania Press.

Lacan, Jacques 1981. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* trans. Alan Sheridan ed. Jacques-Alain Miller New York: W. W. Norton

Langer, Susanne 1951. *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite & Art.* New York: Mentor

Larson, Mildred L. 1998. *Meaning-Based Translation.* Dallas: Ethnologue.

Lawrence, D.H. 1969. *Selected Essays.* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd.

Levenson, Michael ed. 1999. *Modernism* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Levi-Strauss, Claude 1974. *The Savage Mind* London: Wiedenfeld & Nicolson.

Longenbach, James 1997. *Modern poetry after Modernism.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Messaris, Paul 1994. *Visual 'Literacy': Image, Mind and Reality* Boulder: Westview Press.

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

Mukherjee, Sujit 1994. *Translation as Discovery* Hyderabad: Orient Longman.

Ojo, S. Ade 1986. 'The Role of the Translator of African Literature in Inter-cultural Consciousness and Relationship', *Meta* Vol. 37,no. 3, 295-305.

Paschim Banga Bangla Akademi. 1998. *Misti Chora Tapur Tupur*. Calcutta: Paschim Banga Bangla Akademi.

Peirce, Charles Sanders 1931-58. *Collected Writings*. 8 volumes. Ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss & Arthur W. Burks Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Prakash, Om. 1961. *Food and Drinks in Ancient India*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.

Rabinow, Paul ed. 1984. *The Foucault Reader* Pantheon

Ramakrishna, Shantha ed. 1997. *Translation and Multilingualism*. Delhi: Pencraft.

Ray, Satyajit 1976. *Our Films, Their Films*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman.

Riffaterre, Michael 1980. *Semiotics of Poetry*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Roy, Annadashankar 1997. *Kheyal Khushir Chora*. Vol 2. Calcutta: Mitra and Ghosh Publishers.

Roy, Kiran Lekha. 2000. *Barendra Randhan*. Calcutta: Subarnekha.

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

Saussure, Ferdinand de, 1983. *Course in General Linguistics*. trans. Wade Baskin London: Fontana.

Sen, D.C. 1911. *History of Bengali Language and Literature*. University of Calcutta.

Simon, Sherry 2002, 'A Single Brushstroke Writing Through Translation: Anne Carson' *Journal of Contemporary Thought*, 15 (Summer), 47-56.

Starobinski, Jean & John A. Gallucci, 1983. 'The Body's Moment' *Yale French Studies*. 64, 273-305.

Stutley, Margaret 1980. *Ancient Indian Magic and Folklore*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Tagore, Rabindranath, 2002. *Chhara Samagra*, Kolkata: Kalikalam.

Todorov, Tzvetan. 1991. *Genres in Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Trivedi, Harish 1993. *Colonial Transactions*. Calcutta: Papyrus

Trivedi, Harish & Meenakshi Mukherjee, ed. 2000. *Interrogating Postcolonialism* Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study.

Voloshinov, Valentin N. 1973. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* New York: Seminar Press.

Willis John S. & Hugh Mehan, 2001. '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

Young, Robert 1995. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Culture, Theory and Race*. London: New York: Routledge.

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.