International Research Journal of Education and Technology (IRJEdT)
‖ ISSN: 2581-7795, Impact Factor 5.007 ‖
‖ Peer-Reviewed | Open Access | International Journal ‖
‖ Volume: 04 | Issue: 06 | June 2021 | www.irjweb.com ‖

CHILDHOOD, MEMORY AND THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF CALCUTTA IN AMIT CHAUDHURI'S A STRANGE AND SUBLIME ADDRESS

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Abstract

Amit Chaudhuri's A Strange and Sublime Address (1991) presents a sensitive portrayal of childhood, family relationships and urban existence through the experiences of a young boy named Sandeep. The novel explores the everyday life of a Bengali middle-class family in Calcutta and examines how childhood perceptions transform ordinary experiences into moments of wonder and discovery. Unlike conventional novels that depend heavily on dramatic incidents and complicated plots, Chaudhuri's narrative focuses on domestic activities, family conversations, neighbourhood experiences, changing weather and the ordinary rhythms of city life. This paper examines the relationship between childhood and memory, the representation of Calcutta as a cultural space, the importance of family relationships and the literary significance of everyday experiences. It also analyses how the novelist uses sensory descriptions and a child-centred perspective to represent the changing relationship between tradition and modernity. The study argues that the novel transforms ordinary domestic experiences into meaningful literary expressions and offers an intimate understanding of urban Bengali middle-class culture.

Keywords: Amit Chaudhuri, Childhood, Memory, Calcutta, Family Relationships, Urban Culture, Indian English Fiction, Everyday Life.

1. Introduction

Indian English fiction has developed through diverse literary approaches that explore social realities, cultural identities, historical experiences and individual relationships. Among contemporary Indian English novelists, Amit Chaudhuri occupies a distinctive position because of his interest in ordinary human experiences, cultural surroundings and the aesthetic significance of everyday life.

A Strange and Sublime Address, published in 1991, is Chaudhuri's first novel. It presents the experiences of Sandeep, a ten-year-old boy who travels from Bombay to Calcutta during his school holidays to visit his maternal uncle's family. The difference between his modern residential surroundings in Bombay and the traditional family environment in Calcutta forms an important part of the narrative. The novel explores the relationship between the individual, family, childhood and urban culture through a series of carefully observed experiences.

The novelist does not depend upon extraordinary events to communicate his ideas. Instead, he gives importance to ordinary activities such as eating meals, visiting relatives, shopping, observing the weather, participating in family conversations and watching the activities of

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adults. These experiences become significant through the sensitive observations of the young protagonist.

The novel is particularly important for its representation of Calcutta as a living cultural environment. The city is not merely a geographical location but a space of memories, relationships, traditions and everyday experiences.

2. Review of Literature

Critical discussions of Amit Chaudhuri's fiction frequently highlight his distinctive treatment of ordinary life and his poetic narrative style.

Patrycja Magdalena Austin, in her article "Amit Chaudhuri's Poetic Dwelling in A Strange and Sublime Address and Afternoon Raag," examines the importance of the local environment in Chaudhuri's fiction. She argues that the novelist moves beyond conventional divisions between the local and the global by presenting the sensory experiences and specific cultural characteristics of everyday life.

Pallavi Sanyal's study, "A Strange and Sublime Longing: Looking Back at Childhood in Calcutta in A Strange and Sublime Address and The Blue Bedspread," explores childhood and nostalgia in relation to the Bengali middle-class environment. Her discussion provides an important perspective for understanding the relationship between childhood memories and cultural identity.

Somdatta Bhattacharya's critical biography of Amit Chaudhuri also discusses the novelist's preference for ordinary experiences, fragmentary narratives and the details of everyday existence.

The present study builds upon these critical perspectives by examining how childhood perception, family relationships and urban cultural experiences are interconnected in the novel.

3. Objectives of the Study

The study has the following objectives:

1. To examine the representation of childhood experiences in the novel.
2. To analyse the importance of memory and nostalgia in the narrative.
3. To explore the portrayal of Calcutta as a cultural and social environment.
4. To examine family relationships and middle-class domestic life.
5. To understand the contrast between traditional and modern lifestyles.
6. To analyse the novelist's narrative technique and descriptive style.

4. Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research methodology. It is primarily based on textual analysis of Amit Chaudhuri's A Strange and Sublime Address. The research examines

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the characters, narrative structure, descriptions, themes and cultural representations found in the novel.

Secondary sources include published literary criticism, academic articles, author profiles and relevant discussions of Indian English fiction. The study uses interpretative and thematic approaches to understand the literary and cultural significance of the text.

5. Childhood as a Central Theme

Childhood occupies a central position in the novel. Through Sandeep, Chaudhuri presents a world in which ordinary surroundings appear new, fascinating and sometimes mysterious.

Sandeep's experiences in Calcutta are different from his everyday life in Bombay. His uncle's house introduces him to a larger family environment in which several people share domestic spaces, responsibilities and daily activities.

The young protagonist observes the behaviour of adults without fully understanding their concerns. Their conversations, financial difficulties, social interactions and personal relationships gradually become part of his developing understanding of the world.

The significance of childhood in the novel lies in its capacity to discover beauty in ordinary situations. The child does not necessarily understand the social or economic implications of every event. However, his observations reveal the emotional atmosphere of the family.

Chaudhuri uses this perspective to demonstrate that childhood is not merely a stage of biological development. It is also a process of discovering relationships, cultural surroundings and the complexities of human behaviour.

6. Memory and Nostalgia

Memory is another important element of the novel. Sandeep's visits to Calcutta create experiences that remain meaningful because of their emotional and cultural associations.

The contrast between Bombay and Calcutta is particularly significant. Bombay represents the child's immediate residential environment, whereas Calcutta provides an alternative world of extended family relationships, traditional customs and collective domestic activities.

The memories associated with Calcutta are developed through ordinary experiences rather than extraordinary incidents. Food, conversations, family gatherings, streets and changing weather contribute to the emotional atmosphere of the narrative.

Nostalgia in the novel is not simply a desire to return to the past. It is also an appreciation of experiences that reveal the importance of family and cultural belonging.

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The novelist suggests that personal identity develops through accumulated memories and relationships. The places in which individuals spend their childhood become important elements of their emotional world.

7. Calcutta as a Cultural Landscape

Calcutta occupies a significant position in the novel. It is presented as a city of cultural diversity, traditional households, social relationships and everyday activities.

Chaudhuri does not represent the city through grand historical descriptions or political events. Instead, he concentrates on the ordinary experiences of people living in the city.

The uncle's house functions as an important social and cultural centre. It brings together different generations and provides a setting for conversations, domestic activities and family interactions.

The city is also represented through its physical and sensory characteristics. Heatwaves, thunderstorms, streets, neighbourhood activities and household surroundings contribute to the atmosphere of the narrative.

Through these descriptions, Chaudhuri demonstrates that the identity of a city is not determined only by its buildings, institutions or historical monuments. Its identity is equally shaped by the everyday experiences of its inhabitants.

Calcutta therefore becomes a space where cultural traditions and modern urban experiences coexist.

8. Family Relationships and Middle-Class Life

Family relationships form the emotional foundation of the novel.

The relationship between Sandeep and his maternal uncle's family introduces the importance of extended family structures in Indian society. The household is characterised by shared activities, personal interactions and collective experiences.

The novelist also presents the economic realities of middle-class existence. The family depends on a business that is experiencing difficulties. These circumstances provide an insight into the financial uncertainties that affect ordinary households.

However, the narrative does not transform economic difficulties into a conventional story of struggle and conflict. Instead, these realities remain part of the larger domestic environment.

Chaudhuri's representation of family life is realistic because it acknowledges both affection and practical difficulties. Family relationships are shown through daily interactions rather than dramatic declarations of emotion.

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The novel thus provides a valuable picture of the emotional and economic dimensions of Bengali middle-class society.

9. Tradition and Modernity

The contrast between Bombay and Calcutta also represents the coexistence of traditional and modern lifestyles.

Sandeep's life in Bombay is associated with a modern residential environment and a relatively private family arrangement. His uncle's home in Calcutta, on the other hand, introduces him to a more collective form of domestic existence.

The differences between the two cities are not presented as a simple opposition between progress and backwardness. Rather, they represent different forms of urban experience.

The traditional family environment offers a sense of community and belonging, while the modern residential environment represents a different pattern of everyday living.

Through Sandeep's experiences, the novelist examines how children encounter different cultural systems and gradually develop an understanding of their social surroundings.

The novel does not reject modernity or idealise tradition. It presents both as important aspects of contemporary Indian life.

10. Narrative Technique and Literary Style

One of the most distinctive features of the novel is its narrative technique.

Chaudhuri gives importance to descriptive details, sensory experiences and seemingly insignificant incidents. The narrative does not follow a conventional pattern of continuous dramatic development.

Instead, the novelist creates a sequence of observations and experiences that collectively establish the emotional and cultural atmosphere of the story.

His prose is marked by clarity, sensitivity and poetic observation. Everyday objects and activities receive considerable attention.

The child-centred perspective is particularly effective because it allows the reader to experience the familiar world from an unfamiliar point of view.

This technique makes the ordinary appear extraordinary. The literary significance of the novel therefore emerges not from the magnitude of its events but from the depth of its observations.

11. Major Findings

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The study identifies the following major findings:

1. Childhood experiences provide the central perspective through which the novel explores family and society.
2. Memory and nostalgia contribute significantly to the formation of cultural identity.
3. Calcutta is represented as a living cultural environment shaped by everyday activities.
4. Family relationships reveal the emotional importance of extended family structures.
5. Economic difficulties are incorporated into the ordinary experiences of middle-class households.
6. The contrast between Bombay and Calcutta reflects changing patterns of Indian urban life.
7. The novelist's descriptive and poetic narrative style gives literary importance to ordinary experiences.

12. Conclusion

Amit Chaudhuri's A Strange and Sublime Address is a significant contribution to Indian English fiction because of its sensitive representation of childhood, family relationships and urban culture. Through the experiences of Sandeep, the novelist presents the ordinary world of a Bengali middle-class family with remarkable attention to detail.

The novel demonstrates that literary significance does not always depend upon dramatic events, extraordinary characters or complicated plots. Everyday experiences can also provide meaningful insights into human relationships, cultural identity and social transformation.

Calcutta emerges as an important cultural landscape where memories, traditions and family relationships are preserved through ordinary activities. The contrast between Bombay and Calcutta further highlights the changing nature of urban and domestic life in India.

Ultimately, the novel celebrates the beauty of everyday existence and demonstrates how childhood perception can transform familiar surroundings into meaningful experiences. It establishes Amit Chaudhuri as a distinctive novelist whose literary strength lies in observing and interpreting the ordinary dimensions of human life.

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