

Is it just the Narrator or the Author Himself? Amit Chaudhuri's Autofiction: An Exploration

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Abstract

Chaudhuri's entire corpus of fiction contains traces of autobiographical elements in it, and if one analyses it from its purview, it is clear that every reader is receptive to this distinctive characteristic, regardless of Chaudhuri's claims in a few of his interviews that he refutes it. The aim of this paper is to examine Chaudhuri's fictional world from an autobiographical perspective so as to gain insight into the various aspects of memory that enable a writer to psychologically be impacted by the experiences of his life when he writes a novel. Additionally, a comparison of Chaudhuri's writing with the works of other writers is done in order to better understand how his work has evolved over time. The research focuses in particular on the tiny, yet important thread of social life and politics found throughout his writing. Accordingly, this paper examines Chaudhuri's novels autobiographically, and the ways in which his childhood and adulthood influence the plots of his novels, thus tracing the entire spectrum of Chaudhuri's fiction as a bildungsroman. Furthermore, this paper explores the ways in which Chaudhuri's writing reflects his own personal journey and reflects his experience with the political, social and cultural landscape of his time.

Keywords: Autofiction; Bildungsroman; Memory; Politics; Psychology.

Introduction

Autobiographic elements are one of the several significant components in contemporary fiction. The influence of one's own personal life and memory contributing to the fictional downpour of a person is sometimes conscious while at times it is completely unintentional. This is an aftermath of the influence of childhood, adolescence and adulthood in the life of an individual. Amit Chaudhuri is no exception to this feature as he is also a

product of the circumstances he is put under. There are writers who reject the autobiographical nature of their works as this can be a source of distress for authors who would prefer to keep their personal lives private. As a result, many authors are careful to maintain a certain level of anonymity when writing works of fiction. Amit Chaudhuri's writing style is unique in that it seamlessly integrates his own life experiences and observations into his stories. The result is a distinct blend of fact and fiction that is both engaging and thought provoking. Chaudhuri's fiction is one of the classic examples of a novel that has autobiographical elements, as many of the events are inspired by his own life and hence the characters that are seen through his fiction are either inspired by himself or the acquaintances from his life.

In all of his interviews, Chaudhuri states that there are elements of his own life and experiences that have been woven into the stories, but he does not feel that they are solely based on his own life. It is mandatory for the reader to analyse Amit Chaudhuri's fiction from the point of view of autobiography whenever one reads through his novels, because one always finds that there is a great deal of resemblance between the city of Calcutta, Mumbai, and London, where he is born, raised, and currently lives. This is because Amit Chaudhuri's writing is a reflection of his own life experiences. He believes that his stories, although based on fiction, are a reflection of his life, and thus his readers must consider this when they read his works.

When autofiction is approached from the lens of Doubrovsky, who first used the term 'autofiction' in the back cover of his novel, the author, the narrator and the protagonist share the same name. Though there are several critics' views to admit it and counter it, it is also equally necessary to understand the views of the critics like Genette and Koivisto who share a different belief than the original, believing that autofiction is all about a part of the author's imagination as well as the events and incidents that took place in his life (*Stora Enso*). According to Koivisto who has done significant research in the area of autofiction, the language of autofiction is very important as well the artistic licence that come along with the chronology of the events that happens through the fiction. It can be understood that the chronology of events that happened in an author's life may not be reflected exactly as in the same order in an autofiction. Nevertheless the events and the characters can be arranged in a haphazardly fashion completely different from reality, or in the same order, or perhaps in a manner combined with imagination as well. However, what matters in autofiction is that it is a blend of both fiction and autofiction, and one

can definitely overpower each other in the arrangement of plot. For example, in Amit Chaudhuri's, *Friend of My Youth*, he presents the narrator who also is an author and happens to have the name of Chaudhuri who comes from London to Bombay for the book reading of *The Immortals*.

There are a number of reasons that can be cited to support the autobiographical nature of *Friend of My Youth*, including its historical relevance and the relatively realistic portrayal of the traumatic history and backstory associated with the Taj attack of 2008 in Mumbai. The use of local dialects, the vividly described settings of Mumbai, and the strong sense of nostalgia also add to the authenticity. The *Friend of My Youth* was able to convey the horror of the event in a way that was both realistic and emotive. It gave the audience an understanding of the tragedy without glorifying it or making it seem unreal. The story ultimately gave a voice to those who were affected by the tragedy. Both the author and the narrator in the novel reflect the author Chaudhuri himself. Just as Chaudhuri is a renowned writer who dons multiple caps as a writer of fiction, poems and essays, a literary critic, a singer and a musician, the narrator from the *Friend of My Youth* also reiterates the same when he describes himself, as he wears multiple caps throughout the book:

No, I was plotting other things at the time – plotting not the novel, but the resistant tale we call we call 'life'. At the very end of civilization; I just wanted to get out, move. I moved to Calcutta. Then I tried to escape globalization by taking leave of the novel. I wrote stories. I wrote essays. I composed music. This is what I did a lot of those nine years. (Chaudhuri, *Friend of My Youth* 19)

Having lived in Bombay as a child, Amit Chaudhuri did not enjoy living there as much as he enjoyed living in his hometown, Calcutta, so he eagerly awaited his summer vacation to be able to visit his uncles and aunts in Calcutta. Throughout *The Immortals* and *Friend of My Youth*, he is able to recreate the same feeling he once experienced as a young adult or as a teen in Bombay, as he voices through the characters of Nirmalya in *The Immortals* and the narrator in *Friend of My Youth*. As a teenager, the author yearned for Calcutta, and as a middle-aged man, the narrator, despite his attempts to project himself and pretend that he dislikes Bombay, also longs for the city. This is not the real representation of his true self, as he loves Bombay just as Calcutta. He finds himself drawn to both cities despite their differences.

In reality, he is in love with both cities and the idea of having roots in both

places. He is a product of both cities and the love for them is reflected in his writing. Through his motif of journey in his fiction, and his adaptation of the literal and figurative journey as his protagonists like Chaudhuri from *The Friend of My Youth* and Nirmalya from *The Immortals* wade through the process of life, he gives a glimpse to his readers to approach the journey of life with an objective outlook and keep it real as much as possible. He wants to emphasize the importance of cherishing and embracing the journey of life, rather than just striving for the destination. He believes that this attitude is the key to true happiness and contentment. He encourages his readers to be prepared for the journey of life, no matter how long and arduous it may seem. He also beckons his readers to embrace the moments of joy and sorrow with the same enthusiasm and courage. He leaves them with a message of hope that they can make it through the journey of life with a little courage and faith.

Most of the characters are modelled after the personality of Chaudhuri himself, and especially the main characters. For example, the ten-year-old Sandeep who appears in *The Strange and Sublime Address*, reflects the childhood of Chaudhuri himself and that of his cousins. Much of his life is shown through the characters of Sandeep, Abhi and Babla, and echoes the childhood of Chaudhuri as their lives are showcased in a similar vein. For example, Chaudhuri excels in reading English novels right through his childhood and that is portrayed through the character of Sandeep, while his cousins not very familiar with the language of English stick to reading Bengali novels. As related by Chaudhuri in an interview 'Aalap: In Conversation with Amit Chaudhuri' by Sumana Roy, the same is also reflected in his novel *The Strange and Sublime Address* as Sandeep finds it difficult to read the Bengali letters from the novels that his cousins read. Besides it is a completely alien language for him and even the Bengali letters are shown with such method of defamiliarization as he instils the characteristics of human beings when he personifies the Bengali letters reading through the novels line by line.

Just like Chaudhuri, Sandeep is also a product of globalization that happened during the much later stage as he lives in Bombay, his parents being transferred from Calcutta. As Sandeep visits his Chhotomama's house he is more used to the lifestyle of a Bombay metropolis that he finds it difficult to understand the linguistic nuances of a typical Bengali back in Calcutta. This is because of the fact that Sandeep is not accustomed to reading Bengali while he was doing his schooling in Mumbai or Bombay as Chaudhuri prefers to say. However, though he is linguistically different and far from his cousins who were very much familiar with the native

Bengali language in Kolkata still he is culturally very much affiliated with the native Bengali as his parents brought him up with instilling values of Bengali household as a typical Bangla child. Sandeep finds it interesting as the adults go about their daily business of their day-to-day routine lives as he is mesmerized with their daily events. This also continues with the protagonists from several other novels like in *The Immortals*, especially with Nirmalya who is one of the protagonists. Nirmalya is a late teenage boy who is about to go into the transition of adulthood from his adolescent age who is also very much representative of Chaudhuri's lineage or upbringing. The kind of difficult transition that Chaudhuri would have had, being transformed from an adolescent to an adult in city like Bombay is very much shown through the character of Nirmalya. Being changed from liking western music to liking Hindustani music, Nirmalya is a symbol of representing the pure Indian culture.

Similar to Amit Chaudhuri's passion for Hindustani music, Nirmalya's interest in learning Hindustani music after his brief stint may also be attributed to his passion for this musical style. It has taken him a great deal of experience to understand that Western music may satisfy oneself, but it is actually Hindustani music that appeals to one's soul. Rather than pursuing music for its own sake, Shyam Lal is pursuing commercial success. As a result, it represents Amit Chaudhuri's deepest tendency to value and practice music for its own authenticity and not for anything else. It is probably one of the ways Chaudhuri shows his devotion to Hindustani music, since he always values Indian classical music higher than western music. *Odysseus Abroad* showcases a twenty-two-year-old protagonist named Ananda, who suffers a diasporic crisis as a London University student who lives a life of solitude. Ananda who occasionally meets his uncle, Radhesh, or Rangamama, is representative of the college days of Chaudhuri, who had spent his days similarly as a student in London. Through his interviews, it is also clear that, just like the character of Radhesh, Amit Chaudhuri also had a distant relative in London who helped him while he was a student during his university days. Chaudhuri's fiction is often accused of lacking plot and in-depth storylines but the characters' internal turmoil is described with such vigour and detail that cannot be found in any other works of fiction as it is portrayed much with reality.

The autobiographical aspects of Amit Chaudhuri's fiction also seem like an exploration of the bildungsroman type of fiction, as his fiction is a representation of the development of the psyche of the protagonists over various stages of life. However, there is a much-underrated trait that Chaudhuri's fiction has which is different from many other works of art. The

ten-year-old protagonist Sandeep from *The Strange and Sublime Address*, teenage Nirmalya from *The Immortals*, twenty-two-year-old Ananda from *Odysseus Abroad* and Jayojit, a divorcee from *A New World* are all different shades of characters that reflect the persona of Amit Chaudhuri over various facets of his life.

For writers like Chaudhuri, writing is an “integral part of existence”, that becomes an almost essential part of living, part of the process of existence. Writing is like breathing, and almost any art for that matter, not just writing becomes a way of life. Writing thus becomes an essential element in the development of self, as only the author happens to know the real meaning of their story, irrespective of the views of the analysts and critics, and this is put forth by Claudia Gronemann as follows:

Autofiction reveals existential motives for writing, raising them to the status of components in the autobiographical debate. Writing becomes an integral part of existence, a never-ending process of producing subjectivity through language. The referential self conceives of itself – in the fabric of the text – as part of a fiction, because no author can claim to know the real meaning of his or her own story. (Claudia Gronemann 245)

The author thus becomes more like a sponge that can both ‘observe’ and ‘absorb’ the details that surround him, and weave stories that are interconnected with reality as much as they are part of the fiction.

Robert Tracy in his essay ‘Stranger than Truth: Fictional Autobiography and Autobiographical Fiction’, published in *Dickens Studies Annual*, quotes Proust from *Swann’s Way*, “it seemed to me that I myself were that of which the work spoke ... the subject of the book would detach itself from me, I was free to have it be about me or not about me.” (Tracy 275) This echoes the perspective of Chaudhuri too, towards his own work. It is neither mandatory for the subject of the work to be or not to be about the author, as it is entirely the author’s discretion to make the work completely about himself or including sparing details about his life, or not include anything at all. In Chaudhuri’s case, he includes a few details of his life but not so in a very obvious way.

The writers of autobiographic fiction sometimes seem to employ the unattainable stuff in the lives of writers through presenting them in an autobiographical fiction, thus attaining the “perfection of the life” which normally is not possible in life, by itself. Robert Tracy puts it as follows:

Perfection of the life, however unattainable in the real world, can paradoxically be achieved by turning the life into a work of art; perfection of the autobiographical work transforms the life. And if the life prove too refractory, there is always the possibility of an autobiographical fiction, a novel with a protagonist whose adventures and development resemble the author's, but are freed from dependence upon them. (Tracy 276)

Chaudhuri's characters who are too normal for the real world, and often go unnoticed like his uncle, aunt, cousins or sometimes even himself find a prominent place in his fiction, and their inconsiderable and trifling lives in the reality is given paramount consideration as their lives are "perfect" in the fictional world, and occupy indispensable places in the novels. Thus, it is highly subjective and lies entirely upon the discretion upon the readers to consider whether Chaudhuri's protagonists are really about the Chaudhuri or the narrator, or a reflection of the characteristics of the combination of both the narrator and the author.

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