

Economical Transition and Loss of Identity: A critical study on Amit Chaudhuri's A Strange and Sublime Address

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This paper examines Amit Chaudhuri's A Strange and Sublime Address themes of identity loss and economic transformation. The study explores how economic shifts in post-liberalization India impact both individual and collective identities through a close reading of the text. The allure of traditional values is contrasted with the growing forces of modernity in Chaudhuri's depiction of middle-class life. The research delves into how urbanization, materialism, and shifting cultural dynamics create a sense of dislocation and nostalgia. Drawing upon postcolonial and socio-economic theories, this study aims to understand the nuanced interplay between economic progress and the erosion of cultural and personal identities. This novels narratives center on some of the most important questions regarding home that each one brings up in relation to the social, cultural, and economic shifts that society is experiencing as a result of globalisation. These books show how the middle class in India is reacting to the shift to a more globalized society in various ways.

Keywords: Transition, Materialism, Urbanization, Modernity.

1. Introduction

This paper examines Amit Chaudhuri's A Strange and Sublime Address themes of identity loss and economic transformation. The study explores how economic shifts in post-liberalization India impact both individual and collective identities through a close reading of the text. The allure of traditional values is contrasted with the growing forces of modernity in Chaudhuri's depiction of middle-class life. The research delves into how urbanization, materialism, and shifting cultural dynamics create a sense of dislocation and nostalgia. Drawing upon postcolonial and socio-economic theories, this study aims to understand the nuanced interplay between economic progress and the erosion of cultural and personal identities. This novels narratives center on some of the most important questions regarding home that each one brings up in relation to the social, cultural, and economic shifts that society is experiencing as a result of globalisation. These books show how the middle class in India is reacting to the shift to a

more globalized society in various ways.

Economic transitions often reshape the social, cultural, and psychological landscapes of a society. In the Indian context, post-liberalization reforms of the 1990s ushered in a period of rapid modernization, globalization, and consumerism. While this brought economic opportunities, it also disrupted traditional ways of life, creating tensions between modern aspirations and cultural roots. Amit Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address* captures this delicate balance, portraying the everyday life of a Bengali middle-class family against the backdrop of an evolving socio-economic environment. This research focuses on the dualities in the novel: nostalgia versus modernity, tradition versus change, and individuality versus collective identity. Through these contrasts, Chaudhuri offers a lens to explore the broader societal implications of economic transition. Scholars like Homi Bhabha and Edward Said have explored how colonial histories influence post-independence identity formation. In Chaudhuri's work, this influence is reflected in the tension between retaining indigenous cultural practices and adopting Western modernity. Critics have noted Chaudhuri's distinctive narrative style, marked by poetic descriptions and a focus on the mundane. This aesthetic creates a sense of timelessness that contrasts with the transient nature of economic and cultural changes. The novel's depiction of Kolkata captures the city's dual identity as a repository of cultural heritage and a site of economic transformation. Scholars have highlighted this tension in urban literature as a significant theme.

Economic transitions in *A Strange and Sublime Address* serve as a catalyst for the erosion of individual and collective identities, as evidenced through the dissonance between tradition and modernity. The novel suggests that while economic growth may bring material benefits, it often leads to a profound sense of alienation and cultural loss. By examining these themes, this study hypothesizes that Chaudhuri's work critiques the socio-economic changes in India while offering a nostalgic longing for a simpler, more rooted existence. This study employs a qualitative approach, focusing on a close textual analysis of *A Strange and Sublime Address*. It integrates postcolonial theory and socio-economic critique to examine the interplay between economic transition and identity loss. Secondary sources, including critical essays and scholarly articles, will contextualize the novel within the framework of Indian literature and post-liberalization discourse.

The novel captures subtle shifts in everyday life caused by urbanization and globalization, highlighting the erosion of traditional values and lifestyles. Through characters and settings, Chaudhuri explores the alienation and nostalgia stemming from modernization. The protagonist's reflective observations underscore a dissonance between the past and present.

Chaudhuri's poetic and detailed prose emphasizes the beauty of the mundane, contrasting it with the impersonal nature of modern economic changes.

In these novels Chaudhuri depicts the decline and eventual destruction of the family business and the loss of the extended family's houses, moving from a privileged cocoon life in the family's private compound to ordinary apartments in a municipal block. The loss of house and the decline of the family business, in these novels, is a metaphor for the decline of 'old' middle class values in modern India and a period of transition and change socially, culturally and economically. In an interview with Fernando Galvan:

Chaudhuri states in connection with the settings of his novels; I identified Calcutta as a place that was home. Home was interwoven with the Bengali language, my mother tongue...which was hardly spoken out of my immediate home. In school I spoke only English, so to go back to Calcutta was to re-enter the Bengali language. (217)

A Strange and Sublime Address describes middle-class Calcutta, a city of developed and economic stagnation. But with the outstanding cultural flavour, seen through the eyes of the twelve-year old character Sandeep. This novel has a very thin plot, and it is a journey down memory lane. The boy Sandeep, the protagonist seems to be a portrayal of, who happens to be the protagonist of the novel, lives with his parents in Mumbai. Sandeep, the main character of novel seems to be a portrayal of Chaudhuri's own childhood. With a marvelous skill, Chaudhuri not only recreates in the novel simple pleasures of childhood-bathing, eating, sleeping and exploring the city-but also how the business of living, working, coming to terms with the world of senses imposes an increasing burden on the soul. From an organized and lonely life of a flat in Bombay which is situated on the twenty-third floor, Sandeep comes to Calcutta to spend his holidays at his uncle's home. Through the eyes of the ten-year-old, a vast, kaleidoscopic backdrop emerges, and even such a simple act as bathing takes on the overtones of a ritual and a keen sense of nostalgia assails us. Compared to Bombay, it is an entirely different world. With a feeling of amazement, he enjoys his new world, the living place in Calcutta and the adjoining localities. Calcutta, the novel's primary setting, serves as a poignant symbol of this disintegration. Once known for its intellectual vibrancy and communal harmony, Calcutta in the 1990s is a place marked by poverty, political turmoil, and a decaying urban landscape. Edward Said says:

"Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement." (212)

Chaudhuri has observed almost complete fidelity in the depiction of a vivid picture of Calcutta - life. The city appears with its summer, its power-cuts, the daily puja of the household deity, the hustle and bustle of city-life and so on. This novel shows the themes: the happiness of simple joys of childhood and the suggestion of an advance of life. The writer's knowledge of Calcutta city emerges to be very sound. He suggests various ways of spending a Sunday evening in Calcutta, for instance; "one should drive to Outram Ghat, take a stroll at river Hooghly, could stay home, and listen to plays on radio or watch a cinema" (11).

These details give an impression of a typical middle class Bengali household in Calcutta. He successfully transforms this world of children into a universal vision. The narration moves both spatially and temporally; it does not merely present a story but rather it makes the reader live and share an actual experience with minute details of time and place. Along with Calcutta, Mumbai also figures as the representation of disorienting modernity. The city of Mumbai provides as a fitting contrast. The opportunity of an idea of Indianness built on the inequalities within the culture appears to Chaudhuri fairly often a lack, directing to a sense of disorienting loss. Every feature of *A Strange and Sublime Address* has its right place. The evocation of a child's world-view clearly proclaims the author's engagement with the base and roots of

human life and, by extension a vision of innocence, untouched by adult choices and attitudes. The local spaces and people give an impression of nostalgia which is simultaneously accompanied by a sense of loss and a sense of dislocation. There seems to be an autobiographical strain in the novel insofar as Sandeep, the protagonist, bears sufficient resemblance to Chaudhuri's own childhood. In his *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha argues:

For a willingness to descend into that alien territory - where I have led you - may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture; based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity. To that end we should remember that it is the 'inter' - the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space- that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. (38)

The life in the city of Bombay is more organized, mechanical and lonely. In contrast, the city of Calcutta is marked by a lively and vigorous local culture, and a sense of community-life, togetherness. Sandeep's periodic stay in Calcutta creates a vision of the ways in which the middle-class Bengali society works and acts.

He manages to portray the subjectivities of the local Bengali culture through the behaviour and communication of the characters in *A Strange and Sublime Address*. To explain this, one has to progress from the general to the specific representation of a character like Chhotomama. He is a good example of a local subject which is a crucial factor in the mapping of cultural spaces. His inclination towards political regionalism crystallizes in his comic and incongruous behaviour for he forgets at the moment that he is talking to young boys, who are shorn of any political allegiance. Chaudhuri's fiction places an almost exclusive emphasis on such spaces which have been marginalized by dominant historiographies. Moreover, such spaces do not hold a mirror to these historiographies. Such spaces, in fact, constitute the crucial site of the production and cultivation of the quotidian in his novels which weave the tangible texture of locality. The local culture is shown as distinct from the dominant national culture, still remaining a part of it. *A Strange and Sublime Address* seems to offer space for the local culture as a viable alternative which helps us apprehend the intricate relationship between the public and the private in the context of the cultural realities of post 1947 India.

Properly speaking, the novel has a thin plot and forges ahead on the basis of Sandeep's memories which move around everyday incidents and daily routine life. As Chaudhuri himself confesses in a very subtle way that there is not a story-line in the novel when he makes an observation about the description of some houses in streets:

.... why did these houses seem to suggest that infinitely interesting story might be woven around them? Yet the story would never be pleasing one, because the writer like Sandeep would be too caught upon jotting down the irrelevancies and digressions that makeup lives, and the life of a city rather than a good story - till the reader would yell 'come to the point!' ... and there would be no point except the girls memorising the rules of grammar, the old man in the easy chair fanning himself ... The 'real' story with its beginning, middle and end would never be told, because it did not. (57,58)

With all modesty, Chaudhuri keeps away from direct authorial intrusion and lets Sandeep

narrate the tale. The domestic space, traditionally called ‘the inner space’ is a vital site of culture. Chaudhuri draws Sandeep’s routine in Calcutta as well as in Bombay. Sandeep spends a summer and winter with his parents in a Bombay high-rise building, and spends other summer in Calcutta where he feels more at home in the more traditional life of his uncle’s extended family. Although Chaudhuri prefers to call himself a modernist, his handling of the local culture and its numerous spaces seems to be equally inclined towards postmodern celebration of the fragments of the ordinary, local and quotidian life of Bengali people. The study reveals that Chaudhuri’s *A Strange and Sublime Address* provides a nuanced critique of the socio-economic transitions in post-liberalization India. Therefore, the novel captures the dissonance between economic progress and cultural stability, highlighting the alienation, nostalgia, and loss of identity experienced by individuals amidst rapid modernization. Chaudhuri’s poetic narrative and focus on mundane, everyday life underscore the profound effects of these transitions on personal and collective identities. Moreover, while economic changes bring material benefits, the novel suggests they come at the cost of eroding traditional values and connections to the past.

Henceforth, *A Strange and Sublime Address* is more than a portrayal of middle-class life in Kolkata; it is a poignant meditation on the effects of economic change on human identity. Therefore, through its evocative imagery and reflective tone, the novel critiques the relentless push toward modernization that often sidelines cultural heritage and personal connection. Thus, this study underscores how Chaudhuri uses the mundane to challenge dominant narratives of progress, offering instead a vision of life rooted in introspection and a deep appreciation for tradition. Therefore, the novel serves as a reminder of the complex interplay between economic growth and cultural loss, advocating for a balance between the two.

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