Chapter-9

Conclusion

The preceding chapters have analysed the social changes through the representation of local histories and socio-cultural aspects of life, social transition through the representation of the lived experience of home, and music, foods, and clothes as a metaphor of culture. These themes have been discussed to show how Chaudhuri has mapped the local culture in his writing. The foregoing chapters reveal that Chaudhuri has no plot or story to tell in his novels, rather he describes day to day living and experiences of our daily lives like getting up in the morning, reading newspaper, taking bath, having meals, visiting relations and so on. It is, thus, clear that Chaudhuri considers the poetry of the commonplace as the crux of the matter and the importance he attaches to is fairly well reflected in his writing. He finds magic in the ordinary and so he depicts just the small, ordinary details of the everyday life of an individual in his novels. We have already seen that almost nothing spectacular happens in his novels unless small happenings and events can be called spectacular. He writes about the familiar, ordinary things of daily lives in such a way that they get defamiliarised. His novels amply illustrate how he defamiliarizes the familiar; poeticises the ordinary and makes humdrum things exciting.

Chaudhuri’s novels abound in beautiful images. For Chaudhuri,
image is important; it is a visual experience for him. So, he poetically renders the events and characters in his novels. He describes them so vividly and beautifully and in such a way that they seem new and interesting. As far as sight is concerned nothing which can kindle the imagination of the writer can escape him. He can register all kinds of sounds; he can render various kinds of smell and tastes. He can feel the breeze as well as the storm. This strain is also a marked feature of his stories, poems and non-fictional work. Imagery, in fact, is an indispensable part of his writing.

Chaudhuri does not invent anything to make his works seem new, rather he uses different perspectives to defamiliarize the familiar in *A Strange and Sublime Address*, he has used a ten-year old boy's perspective that infuses a sense of novelty and strangeness to the ordinary, familiar things. Chaudhuri is a great realist. In his works he depicts just the small, ordinary details of everyday life of an individual, how he gets up in the morning, how he shaves, how he reads the paper in the toilet, how he takes bath, how he drives an outdated, difficult-to-start-car, how he prepares for his office and how he endures illness when he falls ill. He writes about the routine, commonplace activities, buying vegetables, offering prayers to the gods and goddesses, visiting relations, going out for a walk or a drive, flying kites, washing clothes, listening to radio and so on.

He is interested in the activities of men and women, the young and the old, children and grown-ups. He is fascinated by various rituals and
ceremonies, times of the day, seasons of the year and ordinary aspects of nature. He is profoundly conscious of his surroundings and does not let his eye skip even the smallest things like a lizard catching an insect, a person pulling out grass while sitting on an open grassy land, a rickshaw-puller killing mosquitoes while asleep. All such things are not big either literally or metaphorically. They have their own tiny stories but they do not add up to any big story of a novel or even a novella. Yet, miraculously enough, from its bits and bobs, odds, and ends, Chaudhuri weaves a fascinating narrative.

Chaudhuri illuminates the surprisingly nuanced intimate worlds of middle class Indian men, women, and children through the eyes of a ten-year-old child Sandeep in *A Strange and Sublime Address*. The novel brims with the author's stunning evocations of place and time, and his radiant description and subtle exploration of the expected and surprising events of daily life. There is an ineffable quality about Chaudhuri's prose which gives his words the power they have to reveal—slowly, quietly with a richness of sensual detail and subtle humour—the significance of the ordinary moments of life. Sandeep, who lives with his parents in a Bombay high-rise, often plunges eagerly into the life of his uncle's extended family in Calcutta. Sandeep's world is filled with credible events and a way of life looked at with some sharpness, some tenderness and some irony. The story is narrated in the third person but child Sandeep plays an important role here for the reader sees things from his point of view as it is a child’s world. Sandeep is an intelligent child and hence, observes details minutely. The novel is loaded with minute details
about the house, city, characters, rituals customs etc. The known and the
unknown are intermingled with each other; it appears as if Chaudhuri has
entered the mind of ten-year-old Sandeep and is writing from his point of
view. There is no story line as such in the novel, as the stories are woven
around every day incidents and events of daily routine life. In fact,
Chaudhuri himself confesses in a very subtle way that there is not really a
story line when he makes an observation about the description of the
some of the houses in the streets.

Afternoon Raag adopts the metaphor of Indian classic music, the
raag to evoke the complex emotions displayed by the narrator or the
protagonist who is a young graduate student at Oxford, away from his
homeland, who sojourns at the university and conjures up his childhood
memories of Bombay and Calcutta. It is about how he perceives things in
a place far-off from his homeland. Chaudhuri's magical raag does not
come out of anything heroic or extraordinary. On the contrary, he weaves
his magic about everyday ordinary life and this magic has nothing to do
with 'magic realism'. It is about bits of ordinary things, though
emotionally quite significant about the life of an Indian graduate student
at Oxford. Through his beautiful well articulated rhythmic prose the
author tells us how the narrator feels at Oxford, he reminisces about his
parents, about his guru, about his homeland and how he interacts with his
friends. Now, this world which does not form any fable and cannot
conform to any plot with a beginning, middle and end. Forms the texture
of the narrative. Thus, it shows his works reflect the Indian sensibility
coated in Bengali culture.
Freedom Song is set in Calcutta during the winter of 1992-93 against a backdrop of growing political tension between the Hindus and Muslims. It is set from the perspective of a young boy Bhaskar with unstable career. It is about his parents’ worries regarding their son's marriage and his future. Freedom Song is a novel that has its settings in the early 1990s, in Calcutta. As has been truly said, it is set against the backdrop of social, religious and economic unrest. It deals with bourgeoisie life in Calcutta which has perhaps been summed up in these words of the narrator: “They woke slept and talked; they eked out the days with inconsequential chatter.” The novel is about everyday lives of two closely related middle class Bengali families who live in Calcutta. It is a novel which describes how a middle-class family manages to get their son married. The son has an inclination towards politics and has joined a political party. It is about the relationship of two friends as they grow up and grow old.

The protagonist in A New World is a mature disillusioned sort of person, whose relationship with his wife has broken. So, it is about his perspective, his perception, for whom India has become a new world not America, in the sense that he has come to India to seek some solace in the company of his parents, after his post- divorce tension. Other interpretation could be that on his return to India Jayojit, the NRI protagonist of the novel, discovers an altogether different India that renews his perception of the old one. I venture to assert that the novel A New World is about the newness of the old world.
After going through his novels, fineness and delicacy of Amit Chaudhuri's perceptions can be easily observed. The tenderness with which he draws the relationships within the family and his gift for recording the slow moving days have now become familiar to us. It is discussed in the earlier chapters how he delineates with keen observation, tenderness and discretion the details of married lives of an elderly couple, Mr. and Mrs. Chatterjee and of a newly married couple Bhaskar and his wife Sandhya. He also presents the broken marriage of Jayojit with his wife Amala and how Jayojit goes through his post-divorce tensions. Chaudhuri brings out beautifully the modes of thinking and subtleties peculiar to the culture of the Indian middle class.

The aim of this study has been to explore how Amit Chaudhuri has come out at his best in describing the small, ordinary scenes of daily life. He never fails to make his characters alive. The Admiral, and some other characters who even do not appear on the scene like Jayojit's ex-wife and his brother are well rendered.

Finally, it has been adequately stressed that the novels of Amit Chaudhuri are carefully structured through a play of contrasts and juxtapositions. He sometimes employs irony to register his protest against certain things like frequent power cuts, postal delays and so on. What I like about him is that while he pokes plenty of fun at the idiosyncracies and travels of his characters and the life they live, there is little malice and less harshness in his works, he does not write about some great event or happening rather, he writes about the ordinary, familiar things of our
daily lives in a way that makes them seem new and interesting. Even his characters are no great heroes or heroines. On the contrary, they are ordinary or unheroic.

Chaudhuri uses Music as a metaphor of culture in *The Immortals* (2009). He utilizes music, foods, and clothes as a metaphor in his novels to show how trans-valuation of values is taking place in the matter-driven modern society. He builds the narrative around the *ragas* of music to show the difficulty of those artists who are struggling to find their right place in the fashion of popular art culture. While lesser writers obsess over the heat and dust, Chaudhuri charts the by-ways of the Indian soul, and thus clear a space in the pantheon of contemporary writers. His works reflect the Indian values coated in Bengali sensibility. This chapter intends to assess how music reflects culture.

*The Immortals* is about the narrative of a family immersed into the high flying corporate world on one hand, and their experience with music on the other. While vividly describing the Bombay of the 1970's and 1980's, the book has its fair share of characters such as Mallika Sengupta, who is married to a leading corporate scion, classical music tutor, Shyam Lal, and Mallika's son Nirmalaya. Each one of them has a different perception about music. While Mallika pursues her dreams of becoming commercially successful by getting her ghazal recording done through a music company, Nirmalaya dreams about purity in art through his exploring of western philosophy, Shyamji uses his prowess in classical music as bread winning tool by offering music-lessons to the wealthy and
elite. To some extent, it seems that the author is describing his own life and upper class Mumbai lifestyle through this book in his portrayal of Nirmalaya as an anguished youngster in a torn kurta and western jeans. The novel explores the relationship between art and commerciality, and shows how far this connection can thrive.

Chaudhuri’s engagement with the classical Indian music forms the core of *The Immortals* which revolves around three characters and the relationship that each has with music. Mallika Sengupta is a middle-class housewife who pursues passion for classical singing, when not performing the role of the wife of a senior corporate executive. Her adolescent son Nirmalaya is an angst-ridden youth who believes in the purity of art and is critical of his mother's seemingly usual attitude. Shyam Lal, the gifted son of an acclaimed-yet poor musician, knows that art cannot be pursued with an empty stomach and spends his time teaching music to various wealthy, bored, culture-seeking elite of Bombay. He is Guru to Mallika Sengupta and her son Nirmalaya.

*The Immortals* is, to some extent, a distillation of the author's own life. Amit Chaudhuri learnt classical music and suffered from a hole in the heart, an ailment that Nirmalaya also has. His mother, like Mallika Sengupta, is a singer trained in Rabindrasangeet. He is born in Calcutta and moved to Bombay and goes to U.K. for higher studies—a trajectory Nirmalaya follows.

His later writing confirms his engagement with culture, literature, Tagore, and Calcutta. He has attempted to revaluate Tagore in *On
Tagore: Reading the Poet Today (2012) as a cultural and literary scion of India. However, he argues against Tagore-worship by the Bengalis which has done more harm to Tagore than any amount of denunciation. He appeals for a balanced reading of Tagore but he simultaneously advocates the reading of other Bengali writers who have contributed towards the making of literary canon and Bengali culture. In Calcutta Two Years in the City (1999-2011), Chaudhuri reveals the various faces of the city from the 19\textsuperscript{th} century onward to the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, minutely recording the transitions that have transformed the city. He skilfully captures the cultural nuances which form the identity of this changing city. In Telling Tales: Selected Writing 1993-2003 (2013), Chaudhuri’s creative and critical genius proves itself in the short pieces originally written for a column in the Telegraph. Here, too he engages with local culture and popular culture through his cryptic comments. His latest work, Odysseus Abroad (2014) is a bold experiment in modernist fiction. Written in the stream – of consciousness mode, it is an audacious redrawing of modernist map. It is an engrossing tale of homesickness and belonging, exile, loneliness, frustration, fear and failure. The novel works out a parody of Homer’s Odyssey and James Joyce’s Ulysses, representing Anands and his uncle Radhesh as modern prototypes of Telemachus and Odysseus. Though he seems to have run the risk of borrowing the structure of Ulysses, he has succeeded in his venture of creating a modernist narrative. It is chiefly remarkable for the fact that it offers a striking contrast to the genteel, upper middle-class Bengali milieu of his earlier novels. Notwithstanding the centrality of London as the setting of the narrative, the locations shift through memory from London to Sylhet, to Shillong and to Calcutta and the fragmentary narrative gets well connected through the protagonist’s memory amidst wandering and
wondering in the city of London.

Chaudhuri’s novels are about everyday stories of ordinary people in India and England, where he lyricises the daily experiences of people, especially the middle class. In his novels, he tries to cultivate the tunes and the tones of the Indian traditions. He considers the poetry of the common-place important. His accepts life as it is and tries to make it beautiful. He draws magic out of the ordinary. His novels are poetic and musical though they are about the ordinary, familiar, mundane things of our daily life. Chaudhuri, in his novels, fashions a highly sensuous world that goes beyond the postcolonial dichotomies of the global and local; foreign and national; and West and East. His local habitations are situated in relation to a wider world perspective. What is more, his narratives display certain impatience with the finished object that we could see as a cosmopolitan profligacy and curiosity. His novels may be read as bearing witness to the culture of Bengal and as a record of its specificity and uniqueness. It is clear, then, that cooking food is not necessarily a direct link to some kind of authentic sense of home; the process might, instead, work to construct a new or hybrid identity.

In Afternoon Raag the narrator notes of his fellow Oxford student and friend, Sharma: "He was kitchen-friendly as well, and spent a good amount of time making food that emitted an aroma of spices that magnified the sense of what it meant to live in England" (178). Even though the sense of Englishness is enhanced, paradoxically, through the recreation of the cooking smells of home in India, Sharma does not adopt a new identity, "as many city educated Indians do in England."
Contrastingly, the narrator falls between two worlds "clinging to my Indianness, or letting it go, between being nostalgic or looking toward the future." His memories of Bombay do include his mother preparing *pithhas*, but they also incorporate "American hamburger arid chop-suey" and "the local *bhelpuri* with its subversive smells of the narrow, spice-smelling streets of west Bombay." Daily life in Oxford already resonates with recognisable, diverse cultural tones: in the Bangladeshi shops on Cowley Road the aisles are "stacked with boxes of chilli powder, packets of dried fruit, jars of pickles, and imported vegetables—roots and tubers—with the flecked soil of Bangladesh still upon them" whilst the coffee served in St Giles' Cafe has a "scorched South Indian flavour." The calendar pictures of gods and goddesses in Sharma's room remind *Afternoon Raag*'s narrator of roadside kitchens and roasting chickpeas. The British-Asian artists Amrit and Rabindra K.D. Kaur Singh develop this association further, visualising and adapting details of food preparation and cooking, and to an extent, secularising the role food has in relation to prayer, as represented in Indian miniature painting for example. The twins, who were brought up as Sikhs in Liverpool, have explained how they learnt the importance of the observation of such rituals in Britain, and the underlying values, in India. The iconography of the temple is important and the household, in contemporary Britain, is perceived as the centre of debate, both sacred and secular. The twins' paintings, thus, participate in cultural debates about East and West through the representation of food in everyday contexts (the household as the centre of debate) and through translating the language of traditional
Indian miniature painting in order to challenge the constructed "norms" of social behaviour. *All Hands on Deck* (1997) depicts the ritual preparation of food for a wedding, in an outdoor, courtyard environment.

Chaudhuri has no real plot or particular story to tell his reader in his novels, but goes on to describing day-to-day living and experiences in a beautiful manner. In his novels we can read about every minute detail of a house or typical day. The novel, we can say, is a glimpse into his characters' everyday mundane life that is disguised behind his beautiful prose. He has the unusual gift of turning every little mundane detail of daily life into poetic beauty. His novels abound in pictorial quality. He literally paints a picture of characters and places while describing them through the use of his beautiful, vibrant and complex fabric of language. He is an expert in creating images.

Chaudhuri possesses a unique gift for sounds and sound patterns. His novels abound in sound images. He has an acute ear for sound effects probably due to his training and accomplishment as a musician. He is a novelist who depicts the ordinary, mundane, daily activities of people specially the middle class and by the magic of his words and language, defamiliarizes the familiar happenings of daily life.

It is not surprising, then, that much of Amit Chaudhuri's novels are a celebration of local cultures and subjectivities. His uniqueness as a writer, however, rests largely on the fact that his sensitive evocations of locality are done through an exclusive focus on the banal and the quotidian in fragmented, episodic form, never woven into holistic
narrative, much less one about the development of the modern Indian nation-state. Banality and locality, in fact, construct themselves as mutual preconditions in his fiction.

Chaudhuri's novels deal with issues neither related to the destiny of nations nor with matters of heart and caste, but with quotidian details of the middle class Bengali life of *maach bhaat* (fish and rice), *doi-mishti* (sweets and yogurt). There is also in Chaudhuri's writings a marked quality of difference - a special texture of style, mood, feeling and evocation - which distinguishes him apart from a great many other Indian English novelists.

It is evident that Chaudhuri has successfully mapped the cultural spaces in his writing. Locations (Bombay, Calcutta, London, Oxford etc.), dress (Kurta, pyjama, dhoti, salwar kameej, saree etc.) varieties of food (fish, rice, curry, bhel puri, jilepi, samosa, chicken-jhalphreji), music (classical Hindustani, western, popular music), spaces (streets, houses, verandas, windows, bedrooms, drawing-rooms, kitchen), wet clothes hung on a rope (clothesline) to dry, political inclinations, opinions and associations of his characters form landmarks of the cultural territory he has set out to map. To this one may add upper class life in Bombay, lower and middle-class life in Calcutta, academic climate in London and Oxford. Bookstores, evening walks in Calcutta and power cuts there etc underline the nature of mundane life. His special focus on music and lyricising and poeticizing of experiences, western philosophy, modern British literature, journey as a metaphor of shift in cultures, the institutions of marriage and related issues such as divorce reinforces his engagement with local and global cultures. Memory and reminiscence
come about as handy tools of his invocation of the past. In his writing, Chaudhuri juxtaposes past and present and boldly expresses his fascination with Calcutta.

Inclusiveness is a key feature of his writing. As a self-proclaimed modernist, he celebrates fragments, but connects them so well that they appear as an organic form. These fragments range from high-rise building to menial figures such as servants, and rickshaw-pullers etc, from Taj Hotel to slums, from high-profile classical music to popular music. His writing embraces both the local and global cultures ranging from shajana tree to Colgate, from Bhel puri to Britannia biscuits and foreign dishes (Chinese and Western). In trying to map the cultural spaces in his writing, Chaudhuri ably clears a space for himself as a sensitive, humane creative writer who dabbles in both realism and modernism. Many of his stories, poems, essays and reminiscences emerge as seeds of his larger fictional creations. Family, home, belonging and relationships constitute the private spaces and indispensable sites of culture, especially the middle-class which finds optimum representation in his writing.