Chapter-1

INTRODUCTION

This study of Amit Chaudhuri’s writing has a title which is likely to evoke and generate both curiosity and controversy. The first part of the title reads ‘Mapping cultural spaces’ while the second part titled ‘A study of Amit Chaudhuri’s novels’ denotes a sequence to explain the first part. The study focuses on the representation and the significance of cultural spaces in the novels of Chaudhuri. It seeks to demonstrate, analyse and explore the meaning and value of cultural spaces which in turn enhance and expand the thematic foci of the novels. These spaces also serve as a key to understand the author’s thematic concerns, his vision of life, leading to comprehensive understanding of author’s work and its proper appreciation. In Chaudhuri’s writing, culture figures as a dominate trope informing the entire narrative in terms of both contexts and concerns.

As this study foregrounds the term ‘mapping cultural spaces’, it is expedient to explain and elaborate the term culture and cultural spaces. The term ‘mapping’ occupies the foremost position; hence it needs a neat clarification. Mapping in the specific context of cultural spaces stands as a potent modifier whose meaning extends beyond the simplistic meaning of the term. It connotes Chaudhuri’s preoccupation with the cultures of the spaces either inhabited, observed or experienced by him and his
caliber as a writer with regard to his ability in the synthesis, evolution and final creative representation of these spaces. The term cultural spaces connotes by extension the cities like Kolkata, Mumbai (Bombay) and Oxford where the author has lived either for a long or relatively shorter period during his life. These spaces include both the domestic sites and spaces of cities such as streets, transport, shopping places, parking spaces, eateries, cinema halls, and malls and so on. In fact, the term cultural spaces scarcely excludes any substantial aspect of middle class life so dexterously represented by Chaudhuri in his novels.

Culture is the mode of generating meaning and ideas. It is a negotiation over which meanings are valid. Chaudhuri’s novels represent the cultural spaces largely inhabited by middle class. These spaces are located in specific regions which explicitly announce not only the author’s familiarity with them but an intense, inclusive and almost compulsive involvement of the author in terms of observation and experience. As such the region in which the spaces of culture receive focused attention also acquires a prominence. Closely connected to the representation of the cultural spaces is the issue of elite and non-elite culture so hotly debated in cultural studies in the contemporary times. Chaudhuri adopts a middle course, choosing the middle class neither at the expense of elite nor non-elite (low) culture. His added emphasis on the middle class shows his inclination or preference rather to act as a creative writer than as a cultural critic. This necessitates an obvious and creative distinction between cultural critique/criticism and creative
writing of fiction. A cultural critic endeavours to subvert the distinction between ‘high culture’ and ‘low culture’. A novelist may seldom follow the track of cultural critic. The analysis of Chaudhuri’s novels would validate this assertion in subsequent chapters.

The study of cultural spaces in the novels of Amit Chaudhuri’s subsumes both spaces inhabited by the characters and the ways in which they think, feel, respond and articulate. The social and personal interactions link the characters to the specific locale or region in which they lead their lives. This locale or region can be defined by its physical, human and functional characteristics such as customs, values, traditions, taboos and festivals. Chaudhuri’s novels have their locale mostly in Calcutta (Kolkata), Mumbai and occasionally Oxford or London. He may be called a regional novelist but not in the manner of Thomas Hardy for Chaudhuri rarely confines himself to Hardyean Wessex. His Calcutta, Mumbai and Oxford hardly focus on grey areas of these particular regions as one may witness in Hardy’s novels. He is mainly occupied with the lives of middle class Bengalis, famously known as ‘bhadra lok’ whose lives and culture he has attempted to map in his novels and prose writings.

The question as to how Chaudhuri is involved in mapping cultural spaces also implies a brief discussion of terms like ‘regional novel', ‘local colours’ and regional sensibility. M.H. Abrams has succinctly defined a regional novel: ‘The regional novel emphasizes the setting, speeches and customs of particular locality as local colour but an important condition
affecting the temperament of the characters and their ways of thinking, feeling and acting.’ (Abrams: 117-118)

As the terms ‘local colours’ and ‘regional sensibility’ stand not only as adjuncts but also as a means to complement and supplement ‘regional novels’ and its overall meaning, these need to be introduced and defined M.H. Abrams has stated that local colour is ‘The representation in prose fiction of setting, dialect, customs, dress and ways of thinking and feeling which are distinctive of particular region, such as Thomas Hardy’s “Wessex” or Rudyard Kiplings’s India’ (Abrams: 153)

The definitions of ‘regional novel’ and ‘local colour’ apparently seem to overlap. However, there is some distinction between the two. ‘Local colours’ is often confined to representation of surface particularities of a region, whereas the ‘regional novel’ deals with more deep-rooted, complex and general human characteristics and problems. Regional novels try to faithfully reflect the realities of a particular region, figuring the true sensibility of its inhabitants. A regional writer concentrates optimum attention on a particular area and uses it and the people who inhabit it as the basis for his/her stories. Such a locale is likely to be rural and/or urban. The regional writer emphasizes and documents the geography, customs and speech of a particular place, with a more serious explanatory focus than for mere background information. The environment is often used to explain the character and action of its inhabitants.
The related term ‘regional sensibility’ is a new coinage which denotes the blending of the 18th century and the 20th century meaning of sensibility in the context of a region. It stands for human susceptibility to tender feelings and by extension a capacity to identify with and respond to the sorrows, joys and feelings of others. In the 20th century T.S. Eliot defined sensibility as a mental faculty which represented the creativity of mind and equality of temperament in a writer. In other words, sensibility, as T.S. Eliot has described it in his essay ‘Dissociation of Sensibility’ denotes an intellectual and emotion perceptiveness. (Eliot: Selected Essays: 96-97)

It is obvious from the brief discussion of the three interrelated terms ‘regional novels’, ‘local colours’ and ‘regional sensibility’ that the regional sensibility of a writer plays a pivotal role in the creation of a ‘regional novel’ with a ‘local colour’. Regional sensibility means characteristic ways of responding in perception, thought and feeling to experience. It emphasizes the setting, speech, social structure and customs of a particular locality. It manifests not only the local colour but also important conditions affecting the temperament of the characters and their ways of thinking, feeling and interacting.

However, this study of Amit Chaudhuri’s writing seeks to explore the sites and spaces of culture which the author has tried to map in his stories, poems, essays and novels. In capturing the cultural ethos of middle class people, especially Bengalis, Chaudhuri often transcends the boundaries set up for regional writer. His works deal with the physical
features, people, life, customs, habits, manners, traditions, languages and life-style of people of his own region. This, however, does not mean that his work is a mere factual reporting or photographic reproduction of reality. His ability to creatively capture the cultural ethos of a given region emphasizes the uniqueness, the various ways in which it distinguishes itself from other localities.

The act of mapping the cultural spaces of select or specific region encompasses the author’s perceptiveness in showing the influence of particular spaces on the characters and events in the novels. He describes the hills, forests, the roads, the buildings, the architecture, the towns and the countries of his region and foregrounds them to his advantage. The space has been used as the background in his works. It plays an important role in the development of the plot and characterization. The spaces region participates in the works of Chaudhuri with all its aspects: nature, culture, legend, customs, conventions, superstitions, topography and environment. He describes farmers, businessmen, labourers, fairs, market places, eateries, book-stores, river-bridges and the sea. He also depicts the backwardness and superstitions of the people, rustic songs and dances and Bengali cuisine. This he does with conviction because he has known them intimately. Domestic spaces acquire a unique significance in his writing, reflecting the culture and life-styles of middle-class people.

To depict the spaces with keen perceptiveness is not the singular trait of Chaudhuri’s writing. What distinguishes him as a notable contemporary novelist, poet, essayist, critic and musician is his crystalline
miniaturist style. It is enhanced and strengthened in its effectiveness by the fact of his being deeply rooted in Bengali society and culture. Although he was born in Kolkata, grew up in Mumbai and studied in England, yet he never forgot his childhood. This is the main reason why most of his novels are set in Mumbai and Kolkata. In his first novel, **A Strange and Sublime Address** (1991), Sandeep, a school-going boy, narrates his gradual awakening to the life of a young writer to be in a vibrant Calcutta household. His second novel, **Afternoon Raga** (1993) shows its narrator studying at Oxford and reminiscing his early boyhood life. In his third novel, **Freedom Song** (1998), there is again a return to Calcutta which becomes the site (space) for the depiction of the interconnected lives of Bengali families. Both the characters and the spaces inhabited by them explicitly show how Chaudhuri has observed these with contemplative humanity. His next novel, **A New World** (2002) clearly brings out the author’s preoccupation with the Calcutta and theme of childhood which might be perceived as a Dickensian influence. His latest novel, **The Immortals** alternates between Bombay and Calcutta, focusing on characters involved in their love and practice of music. It is impressive and rare in that the thematic focus lies on the clash between the old and the new generation. The author examines here the ways in which customs both unite families and pull them apart. The tensions and the anxieties stirred by the conflict lend intensity and poignance to the theme.

Thus Chaudhuri is multiple personalities rolled in one: He occupies a frontline position in the canon of contemporary Indian English Literature. He is a poet, novelist, essayist, short-story writer, a competent literary critic and also a good singer. His intense involvement in classical Indian music and songs displays yet another distinguished aspect of his personality. His writing reflects his love of music and songs which is clearly exemplified by his latest novel ‘The Immortals’.
Chaudhuri’s literary corpus is sizeable and significant. His works epitomize Indian values and Bengali sensibility in a language which is marked by simplicity, lucidity, musicality and distinctiveness. His prose is quite often poetic and lyrical. This adds both weight and emphasis to his thematic concerns. However, his thematic focus is not confined to the delineation of Bengali ethos and traditional Indian values and culture. He might be said rather to represent a synthesis between his Bengali and contemporaneous/postmodern sensibility. In this particular sense, his writings serve as a wonderful key to understanding of what may be called the vitality and specificity of Indian modernity which seems to pervade all aspects of Indian life including its culture.

It is worthwhile to reiterate that Chaudhuri’s work is profoundly engaged with the representation of Bengali culture. But he is not confined within the limits of Bengali people and their culture. His work has a broader canvas and extends far beyond it. It seeks to situate him in the wider context of Indian writing which reflects an amazing continuity and vitality of Indian culture and civilization. Centuries have rolled by, millennia have come and gone, yet Indian culture goes on forever. It claims, without undue exaggeration, to be one of the oldest cultures of world. The love for peace, a sense of togetherness reflected in community-living, tolerance and above all unity in diversity characterize Indian culture. It is renowned for its love of truth, non-violence and warm hospitality. Despite the changes in social, religious and political spheres at various stages of its historical and recent past, the spirit of Indian
culture remains fundamentally unaffected. There has been a revival of traditional cultural modes and manners encompassing discrete areas of life and living. In the course of centuries, the Indian culture has absorbed and assimilated multiple foreign influences. Although, contemporary Indian society has both consciously and unconsciously adopted western mores, ideas, fashions, goods etc., yet people do retain an innate love of Indian culture. Literature, at its best, might be taken as a cultural activity and product. The literatures of India have faithfully projected the life and culture of India in diverse ways, reflecting the systematic progression of its culture. The sublime idea of Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram (the true, good and beautiful) has passed into Indian literature via its culture. Chaudhuri is conversant with almost all prominent aspects and features of Indian culture. His writing reflects the representation of this composite culture rooted in the lofty ideal of ‘Sarve bhavantu sukhinah, sarve santu niramayah, sarve bhadrami pashyantu, mā kashchit dukhbhag bhavet’ (Let all be happy, Let all be healthy, Let good come to all and let no one suffer in sorrows).

Like all true Indians, Chaudhuri, too, is deeply attached to India. However, he is especially inclined towards the culture of Bengal, its language and literature. The biographical facts of his life reveal that though he was born in Calcutta, he could not learn Bangla language as he spent most of his school-going period staying in Bombay. However, he craved to learn his mother-tongue and when he came to his maternal uncle’s house in Calcutta during vacations, he learnt reading Bangla.
When he grew up, he cultivated an ever-growing interest in Indian classical music, a passion which did not relent even during his stay in England where he went for higher studies. He studied Bengali literature and other Indian literatures available in English translation even as he pursued his studies in English literature at London and Oxford.

As a creative writer, Chaudhuri has been influenced by his tutors Dan Jacobson and Karl Miller at University College, London. A number of English writers such as Katherine Mansfield, D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce as well as the French writer Marcel Proust had had their impact on his mind. He, however feels no less indebted to writers in Indian languages, especially Bengali for helping him to mould his creative sensibility. He spoke to his interviewer, Fernando Galvan as follows: I feel in some ways closer to Jibananda Das but it doesn't mean that I don't think Tagore a greater writer and poet. But I think Ray’s films meant a lot to me and later on the writer Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay from whose novel Ray created his first film Pather Panchali……..(Galvan 48-49)

Interestingly enough, Chaudhuri’s interview bears the title ‘On Belonging and not Belonging’. This might, apparently point towards the indeterminate gesture on Chaudhuri’s part when faced with the question of belonging. He forcefully asserted that he intrinsically belongs to India in terms of its culture, language and the narrative tradition. But he cannot specify which India he belongs to, for, in a special way, he belongs to England also for having lived there for a number of years during his
study. He has stated his ambivalent position: 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 fluid position all the time. We don't know where in us the West begins and Indian starts. We don't know where they become interchangeable terms, where in the word ‘Bengali’, the West or Colonial begins and Indian or native starts.

(Aalap, 168)

A similar ambivalence is manifest in his attitude to English language. Though he considered English to be a foreign language for quite some time, he now accepts English as part of the family of Indian languages. ‘Yes……… it’s an Indian language to me for all kinds of purposes, yet it’s not obviously an Indian language in the way Bengali or Sanskrit are Indian languages’. (On Belonging, 48)

Certainly, Chaudhuri embraces India but not without reservation. He takes to task both the West and India for having nursed illogical and absurd notions about each other. I don’t think Saidian criticism addresses the fact that India is not in every sense of the word just different from the West, and that difference is just misunderstood by the West and misrepresented. In many ways India in itself has a middle class which is very much like to Western middle class, and that middle class has its own forms of oppression and has its own forms of oppression and has its own other within India.’ (On Belonging : 48)

This kind of attitude tempts Chaudhuri to ignore other social factors and determinants like caste, customs and religions which do not
let middle class be itself, a homogeneous group. His interest in the middle class finds a focused expression in the choice of spaces inhabited by the middle-class. He may talk about the neutrality of space and the ghost-like presence of the writer but he finds it difficult to keep up the appearance for long. He might be said to dwell as a writer in an ‘in-between space’ partaking of both the Indian and the Western literature and culture. His literary sensibility is shaped by the West, a site of sophistication, ingenuity and vibrant literary traditions from which he tries to negotiate his rootedness in India and Bengal. His love of the city, Calcutta exemplifies this best, reading its culmination in his recent book ‘Calcutta: Two years in the City’. In this book, the city with its people, spaces, sights, sounds, smells and quotidian activities serves as a microcosm of the vaster entity called the spirit of Bengali culture and by implication that of Indian culture.

A writer has, perforce, to be specific in his narration / writing. This specificity entails the principles of both inclusion and exclusion. While he may concentrate his authorial gaze on either Calcutta or Bombay, he is obliged to exclude all other objects and spaces. The act of exclusion is implicit in the task of inclusion and quite often a writer alternates both these acts for purposes of contingency. Exclusion acquires prominence when he focuses on a small part of what he has chosen to include. Whenever he tries to merge a world/space he does not know intimately with the one he knows, he becomes lyrical rather than specific or realistic.
Critics and scholars have tried to place Chaudhuri’s writing within the frame of an alternative tradition of contemporary Indian English literature. In order to steer this new path - the alternative tradition - Chaudhuri has put in a considerable time and energy. He has tried to explore and re-invent it as he found both the earlier literary traditions of Indian English literature inadequate to his authorial business. The first of these - the tradition of social and metaphysical realism - had Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao as its forbears. The second tradition was inaugurated by Salman Rushdie, extravagantly and fashionably imitated and mastered by his followers: magic realism and national allegory.

Chaudhuri is convinced that the middle class in India and elsewhere in the world came into being as a result of the working of the forces of modernity. And it is a fact confirmed and validated by thinkers, historians and theorists all the world over. In this regard, he posits his dissatisfaction against the postcolonial theory which denies any history to India. The proponents of postcolonial theory fail to understand and realize that India had a history quite independent of coloniality. His main objection to postcolonial theory rests on its negation of the presence of the middle class in India. He argues that the writing in Bengali and Indian English novel are not the results of the influence of coloniality:

“It is the condition of modernity, of industrialization, coming to India, and the middle class being formed. From that comes a certain kind
of sensibility that expresses itself in the novel, whether through English or Bengali.” (On Belonging : 48)

Chaudhuri belongs to the elite upper middle class but he aligns himself with the middle class as he is keenly aware of the peculiar characteristics of a sheltered middle class life in India. It is precisely for this reason that he deliberately keeps away from Salman Rushdie and his ilk who propagate and foreground ‘magic realism’, privileging multiplicity polyphony, magic fairly tales, and fantasy over ‘nuance, delicacy and inwardness’. He has explained his stance and practice as a creative writer:

Now the kind of India I write about is a lower middle-class or middle-class India, and not just India, because I write about Calcutta in particular and Bengal, a post-independence Bengal. Reality, lyricising the experience of the middle-class and the spaces in which they live, I am not writing about fantastic India. I am not writing about an historical India, although I might be writing directly about history. The very fact that I am writing about real people means, I think, I am writing about people in history. (On Belonging, 48)

This engagement with reality accounts for Chaudhuri’s uneasy relationship with postmodernism which advocates playfulness and indeterminacy with regard to texts and their meanings. It looks down upon any writing which seeks to represent reality because postmodernism disbelieves in reality and grand narratives. Chaudhuri is intensely preoccupied with aesthetics and emotions and above all with ‘real
people'. For the novelist, the life is the text and language is the source of renewing the perceptions of reality. Chaudhuri considers presence and fullness as the soul of Indian literature including, of course, Indian English literature too. As such he relates himself to the rich cultural and literary traditions of India and derives emotional fulness and sustenance. He loves sounds for the value of suggestiveness.

He has tried to imbibe both ‘bhava’ (emotion) and ‘dhwani’ in his novels and other writings. However, his acceptance and practice of indigenous Indian literary tradition does not mean that he rejects the western literary tradition which has influenced him to a great extent. In fact, Chaudhuri has utilized his creative energy to bring about a synthesis of the Indian and Western literary traditions. In his creative writing, he takes recourse to syncretism, combining both the East and the West. But he has his disaffection with the Western tradition in which ‘realism’ as a mode of representation has almost always been a suspect from Plato to Derrida. He would like us to forget that the rise and development of English novels are largely due to Western realism. Similarly, his claim that realism which he defines as “relationship that modes of representation have to the seasons, human life and the universe” has been “a fundamental and unquestioned concept of Indian art, classical dance and the epics” again makes us a little uneasy.

It is obvious, then, that Chaudhuri takes a modernist position in his writing. The non-linearity of his narrative, the use of narrative voice, the stream of consciousness and his concept of the story without a beginning, middle or end are modernist. His engagement with modernism is manifest
in his exclusive focus on physicality, locality, sensibility and a profound inclination towards formalism. Moreover, as he himself has admitted, he lyricises his experiences and prefers to suggest, to leave things half-said, half-done and to be ambivalent.

Chaudhuri’s novels are a delightful read as they deal with ‘real people’ and ‘people in history’. His novels place various degrees of focus on local culture and cutural spaces. His novels can be most enjoyed for their rendering of the physicality of spaces. Calcutta happens to be a more intimate space for him than Bombay, Oxford and Claremont. In fact, Calcutta figures prominently in all his novels. A Strange and Sublime Address is about a “boy’s discovery of Calcutta......... a novel about spaces, streets, sounds, the auditory background with which an Indian lives". Afternoon Raag about the narrator-protagonist’s estrangement from metropolis, Freedom Song about Calcutta” on the brink of change because of communalism, difference in the political atmosphere and economic liberalization".(On Belonging, 44-45)A New World is about Calcutta which is bereft of childhood magic and the poetry of the ordinary. The Immortals alternates between Bombay and Calcutta, focusing on the characters involved in their love and practice of music.

Calcutta has occupied Chaudhuri since his childhood. It was the city he had loved in his youth and in whose lanes he had spent his tranquil childhood, holidays: one he had made his name writing about. In 1999, he returned with his family to Calcutta where his parents had moved after retirement. It seems that Chaudhuri’s love of Calcutta is immense and inexhaustible because after having almost popularized the
city through its representation in his novels, he did not derive full satisfaction. He has recently published a book, **Calcutta: Two years in the City (2013)** which is an account of his two years stay in the great metropolis. This Calcutta appears in a different avatar for Calcutta which he represented in his novels had receded and another had taken its place. Using the idea of return and the historical elections of 2011 as his fulcrum, he travels between the nineteenth century, when the city burst with a new vitality and the twenty-first century, when, utterly changed, it seems on the verge of another change.

The book is remarkable for the fact that Chaudhuri evokes all that is most particular and extraordinary about the city- from its houses with their slatted windows to its a effervescent cultural life. He paints, too, an acute, often ironic picture of life in city today- of its malls and restaurants, its fitful attempts to embrace globalisation, its middle class who leave and then return reluctantly, its bygone aristocracy and its poor. This book is, among other things, lyrical, brilliantly observed and profound. It is an extraordinary meditation on the problem of living in, understanding and imagining a city.

If Calcutta: Two years in the City comes up as the consummation of Chaudhuri’s love of and admiration for the city, his novels represent the various stages of his fascination with the unforgettable metropolis. The Calcutta figuring in his novels has both physical tangibility as well as specificity. The writer can touch, hear, smell, see and even taste the city. He can register all the sounds- audible and inaudible- the sounds of birds, animals, insects and those of human beings. He has skillfully captured the
sounds of all times of day and can easily discriminate one sound from the other. He can taste and smell with an amazing sensitivity. His novels are replete with the minute observation of sounds, smells, touch etc. Food, eating and eateries also figure conspicuously in his novels. The various ways of preparing food are highlighted because he relishes food imagery and suffuses it with poetry and symbolism.

Chaudhuri’s vision captures sights with their specificity. Nothing that can kindle the author’s imagination escapes him. He registers accurately and describes in an engaging manner how a newspaper-hawker rolls a newspaper and throws it into balcony. He draws a picture of rickshaw-wallahs and shows how they idle away time by sleeping in the rickshaw, killing mosquitos by clapping their hands. The description of spaces like a bathroom acquires a peculiar significance in Chaudhuri’s novels which contain minutiae of details. He shows these in A Strange and Sublime Address how Chhotomama sings while taking bath, how he starts his old car, how patients lie in the hospital, the behaviour and gestures of the taxi-wallah, the conversation of non-Bengali teenagers, the activities of maid servants etc.

In his interview given to Galvan, Chaudhuri has explained that he behaves ‘like a camera’ (Galvan, 45). It is correct because he observes places and people from continually changing angles. For Chaudhuri, reality often has textuality about it and he likes to reproduce texts which already exist. His love of physicality and specificity invariably manifests itself in his novels and in other works too. Physicality, however, is not located in large spaces. He himself states that he feels very
uncomfortable “with the idea of nation” (Aalap, 183). Instead, he sees the dispersal of the nation into various local spaces and local cultures.

As mentioned earlier, Calcutta and Bombay function as microcosm to suggest the larger entity called India. Chaudhuri visualizes and perceives India in the smallest of spaces. Local space represents the life in specific details. A large space resists specific narration. This is why Chaudhuri admires those writers who locate their imagination in specific localities without bothering about the particularity of the nation. A notable example of this kind of writing can be found in Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyya’s Pather Panchali which is just about a village, Mischindipur.

Chaudhuri’s inclusion of small localities carries a lot of meaning and significance in that locality ramifies into a larger dimension, a large space. In his novels, locality does not remain a locality only, it becomes a world. The architectural spaces of the novels can accommodate different, even incompatible worlds of a locality. For instance, the towel-wrapped Chhotomama of A Strange and Sublime Address can coexist with primitive African chief. (A Strange and Sublime Address, 20)

It is, therefore, unjust and absurd to take Chaudhuri to task for having confined his authorical gaze to certain local spaces in Calcutta, Bombay and Oxford. While focusing on these spaces, he dwells on the particularities and peculiarities of the given local culture. What he is really driving at is to create micro worlds. He would talk of India, Bengal and Calcutta at a stretch as if they meant the same thing. In the like
manner, while he is averse to any pan-Indian culture, which he considers as an imagined whole, he would talk of culture of Calcutta and by implication suggest the culture of Calcutta and India. His statement about his novel *Freedom Song* clearly brings out his stance: “I really think of it as an extended poem about the end of a certain phase in Calcutta, in Bengali culture, and in Indian culture.”(On Belonging, 50)

What makes him unique as a novelist is his focus on local culture through it is debatable if it can be synonymous with the entire culture of a place, city or a country. He can discriminate between various local cultures. For instance, he differentiates the culture of East Bengal (now Bangladesh) from that of West Bengal in terms of rituals, traditions, customs, music and literature. Similarly, like a miniature craftsman with a meticulous attention to minute details, he can delineate street culture, suburban and mainstream culture. For Chaudhuri, all places are proper sites of culture: the lanes of Oxford, the streets of Calcutta and the suburbs of Bombay in *St. Cyril Road & other Poems*. This localisation of culture distinguishes him as a writer of great worth but also delimits the scope and appeal of his work.

In addition to his fascination with local culture, Chaudhuri has an innate ability to watch, observe and record the minute of things. He has an eye and ear for everything that relates to and is related to the life of the middle class, especially the Bengali middle class which he depicts in his works. His creative genius is visibly focused on customs, traditions, superstitions and the life-style of the middle class. Their life-style includes the way people talk, take bathe, dress themselves, worship and
perform music, songs and dance. It also comprises the ways in which people respond and interact with one another, in brief, the humdrum quotidian routine of life. Such small and apparently insignificant details as applying mustard oil to the body of a child, washing of clothes, wringing them and spreading them on a clothes-line, serving and eating different varieties of foods, graffiti on the wall, the birds especially pigeons making abstract designs with their droppings cannot escape his eye.

Chaudhuri’s novels are largely, if not entirely, rooted in the Bengali middle class. This focus on the middle class makes his novels inclusive but one can ill afford to ignore the fact that he presents interesting and exciting vignettes of the daily ordinary life of the middle class which forms the backbone of Bengali society and culture. These pictures of local culture appear through discrete voices, sometimes that of Sandeep, sometimes the narrator of Afternoon Raag, sometimes Khuku, Shib and Bhaskar and sometimes that of Jayojit. That Chaudhuri can equally powerfully render the local culture of a foreign town like Oxford is simply borne out by Afternoon Raag.

In fact, Chaudhuri is a novelist of what he calls “the dispersal of culture from self into one space”. He makes no secret of his dislike of closed doors and windows of the West which isolate the self, pamper it, alienate it and make it self-reflexive. He prefers to look outwards to see the self-mingling with others, “with millions and millions of people”. (On Belonging, 46) He opts for comic mode in his writing as he loves the dispersal of the self and identity into various things.
For Chaudhuri, human sensibility has little to do with introversion and a lot with extroversion. It is part of “spaces, streets and sounds” (On Belongings, 46), part of “life happening elsewhere” part of the self dispersal to interact with others. The individual as individual does not charm him and this is clear from his remarks about his first novel:

I did not want to write a novel in which the individual was the centre of 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 bring about the inner life of a person.

(Aalap, 165)

In the configuration of the local Bengali culture and its middle class, Chaudhuri draws support from his memory, which belongs to the outside and not the introspective memory which goes on turning inside until it spends itself. Alongside the delineation of people and their lives, particularly those from Bengal, he brings in the landscape both as background and a tool of configuring spaces. He is interested in the landscape for its spatial value as well as its impact on the consciousness of a person, like the novelist Githa Hariharan, he keeps up his fidelity in the presentation of the character and situations in his novels. He has stated:

Quite often, to use Isherwod’s phrase, I just behave like camera. I just follow them about, eavesdrop on their conversation and see what they are doing. So there’s almost a child-like sight, that is the child who
wants to spy, to overhear, without being noticed himself. (On Belonging, 45)

Clearly, the author’s metaphor of camera reveals his fondness for spaces which are visible though small and understandable even though they might be wide and sprawling. For him, spaces and people cannot be perceived in isolation but in their being inseparable and together. This “well rounded thing” finds space and treatment in his novels.

Spaces and people in his novels acquire an added emphasis and significance primarily because Chaudhuri writes more like a poet than as a novelist. His impulse not only redeems his novels from being a dull record of quotidian life of the Bengali middle class, but also lends grace to it as a vital and fascinating piece of writing. Chaudhuri is very candid about his love of lyricism, imagery and suggestiveness. He admits that behind the “architectural spaces” of the novel where he can “talk about lives and spaces and all kinds of things interacting with each other........ there is a poetic impulse, in which I want to let things remain unsaid, or not want to close up, finish things completely”.

(On Belongings, 46)

Hence, one may easily gather the impression that Chaudhuri excels in the intermixing of poetry and fiction. In this, he owes a good deal to authors such as D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce whose influence on his writing he himself has acknowledged. It must be added, however, that there is an equal contribution of Sanskrit and Bengali literature in shaping this poetic impulse in him. All his novels including the latest one, The Immortals, are poetic meditations on the ordinariness
and humdrumness of daily life of the middle class in Calcutta. Briefly said, his poetic impulse invests the ordinary with an unusualness which accounts for the appeal of his novels. He even turns ordinary spaces like veranda into something interesting.

"Verandah" and “afternoon” figure quite frequently in the works of Amit Chaudhuri as spatial and temporal motifs. Many of his major characters love standing or sitting in “verandah” which for the writer is “an in-between space”, with “no inside or outside" and ensures the “mental space" for the narrator who becomes “a kind of ghost who is not seen, who sees the life unfolding before him and is yet also inside something (Aalap, 178). However, “verandah” as a semiotic encodes indeterminacy or ambivalence more than neutrality. It is part of the house and also the space beyond it and yet it is neither. So in Chaudhuri it is always “either” or “both” and “seldom”, “neither” or “nor”.

The synthesis of opposites, which has been mentioned earlier, remains a defining feature of his writing. This is mainly because he conceives the novels as “the space where I can say one thing and I can exactly say the opposite thing and both can exist" (Aalap, 183). He can take us from one culture to another effortlessly. The transition from “Patola" to jeans, from children flitting around Chhotomama to satellites, from wringed clothes to sick children in Mother Teresa’s arms, from Pablo Neruda to Sukanta Bhattacharya, does not require any conscious effort on the part of either the writer or the readers.

However, the Bengali strain in the novels of Chaudhuri is very conspicuous. Apart from using his Bengaliness as tools to eroticize the
East in its new avatar some Bengali writers (writing particularly in English) employ language, theme, moods, which are very culture-specific. Chaudhuri dwells on Bengali culture but he is averse to exoticizing the East. He has certainly joined the distinguished group of writers from Bengal who write in English: Bharati Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Sunetra Gupta, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Ruchira Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and so on. Most of these writers seem to be more or less obsessed with Bengali culture which finds expression in their writing as direct references to Bengali culture: indigenous food (“luchi, tarkari, phuchkas, jilipe, shingara” etc.), human warmth, and the minute details of the Bengali middle class famously called “bhadralok”. Moreover, their works offer precise charting of Calcutta moorings, often minutely recorded with documentary accuracy to such an extent that it might lead one to believe that these writers adopt realism as their basic mode of representation. Calcutta often figures with a sense of nostalgia. These writers cater to a specific cultural milieu – the middle class Bengali bhadralok culture. Chaudhuri has a distinct and distinguished place among these writers.

A Strange and Sublime Address (1991), his first work of fiction, is a novella with nine stories added to it. It is an impressionistic account of Bombaybred Bengali boy and his periodic visits to Calcutta during vacation. In a single phrase, the book can be described as a typical “mamabarir galp” (story of the maternal uncle’s house) embedded with all its cultural associations of love, indulgence and nostalgia.
In *Afternoon Raag* (1994), the boy is now a student at Oxford. This sojourn at the university and his childhood memories of Bombay and Calcutta form the staple of the book. The entire action of *Freedom Song*, which deals with the middle class life in Calcutta, is neatly summed up in the following words of the narrator, “They woke, slept and talked. They eked out the days with inconsequential chatter.” Cast in the same mould, *A New World* (2000) presents middle aged Joyjit, a failed husband, who has come home to Calcutta with his schoolgoing son to spend summer vacation with his aged parents. He whiles away his time in his South Calcutta apartment doing nothing in particular; his mother overfeeds him and his son with Bengali delicacies. In his fifth novel, *The Immortals* (2009) too, Calcutta receives much focus though the larger part of action takes place in Bombay.

In fact, Chandhuri’s involvement with Calcutta is almost lifelong. His first novella gives the impression that Calcutta was a city of the mind. In response to a similar question, Chaudhuri replied: 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.

The Calcutta of Chaudhuri’s childhood was on the brink of change. When the whole of India began to change in the wake of globalization, liberalization and privatisation, Calcutta alone could not resist the change, and to stay in mainstream it changed itself. So the Bengal and peculiar
culture and which he considers psychologically to be his home, has passed through multiple transitions.

In addition to his literary caliber, Chaudhuri is a talented musician, trained in Indian classical singing. Song and music are embedded in the middle class Bengali life and culture. Almost all his novels have a dose of music and song and his latest novel “The Immortals” is entirely based on the theme of music. In short, he invariably allots much space to music. His music results from half-remembered tunes blended in memory.

The foregoing discussion would seem to be a bit lopsided if a biographical profile of the author is not given. Amit Chaudhuri was born in Calcutta on 15 May, 1962 in a Hindu family of East Bengali origin. His father, Nagesh Chandra Chaudhuri and mother, Bijoya Chaudhuri, were both from Sylhet in East Bengal but left soon after Indian Independence in 1947 when the Indian sub-continent was trifurcated into India and two parts of Pakistan in the east and the west. Chaudhuri was brought up in Bombay. He studied English at University College, London. He completed his doctorate on critical theory and the poetry of D.H. Lawrence at Balliol College, Oxford. He has won prestigious scholarships and fellowships in British and American Universities, Presently, he is a Professor of Contemporary Literature at the University of East Angila, U.K. His criticism and fiction have appeared in many prestigious international journals such as The London Review of Books, The Times Literary Supplement, The Observer, Granta, The New Republic and The New Yorker. His books have earned him a number of
awards and prizes, which testify to his excellence and distinction as a novelist, critic and poet.


Chaudhuri dwells predominantly on kindred Bengali writers, sometimes self-consciously. Tagore, Satyajit Ray, Michael Madhusundan Dutta, Jibananand Das and Nirad C. Chaudhauri are his models to explore an inherent self-division which may be the only hallmark of their modernity. The essays and interviews of Chaudhuri provide a clue to the influence of Bengali culture and literature on the shaping of his creative sensibility.

This study of his novels seeks to be both exclusive and inclusive. It is exclusive in the sense of being confined to his five novels but it is also inclusive in the sense that it seeks to locate intertextual links among his
other works and the texts of his favorite Bengali authors. His novels have 
attracted sufficient critical attention materializing in a number of 
scholarly papers and reviews but Amit Chaudhuri’s work still awaits a 
book-length study. A laudable effort was made by Late S.B.Shukla who 
edited a volume of critical erays on Chaudhuri’s novels. The present 
study seeks to fill this gap by undertaking the study of all his writing from 
the perspective of cultural spaces which mark his work in a very effective 
and vigorous manner. The chapter that follows is devoted to the critical 
exploration of his non-fictional work which may provide a key to 
understanding his fictional work.

*****