Chapter V

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Nirad C. Chaudhuri is the longest living among the writers of world stature in all history and continues to write until the last year of his life. His long life and chequered career have been instrumental in enriching his writing with variety and vision, elegance and wit. Quite expectedly, his works cover an impressively wide range of concerns.

Chaudhuri’s writings, compiled in independent studies in book forms and using different genres like the autobiography, the biography, the essay, and fullscale critiques, display conterminous tendencies. However, it is interesting to note that their lines of demarcation overlap, their concerns converge, and their messages merge. As a consequence, when he studies individuals, he really delves deep not only into their personalities but into the entire \textit{zeitgeist} to which they belong. It is this comprehensive, all-pervasive approach braced by Chaudhuri’s encyclopaedic mind that really throws great and fresh intellectual challenges to his readers. That makes Chaudhuri himself a true Renaissance man for whom only the ever-expanding horizons of knowledge are the limits. Although a few of his later works have faded a little especially due to tautological elements and patronizing tone, most of his works testify to the writer’s eloquence and argumentative abilities, his historically and socially seasoned outlook, his sense of humour,
irony and sarcasm, and above all, his stunning rhetoric and elegant prose.

A thorough analysis of the interaction between England, Europe, and India is the chief motif of Chaudhuri’s works. His India, however, is to an extent north India, especially Bengal. He is among those who introduced contemporary Bengal to the world. Conversely, he is also among those Bengalis who introduced both the “timeless England” and the “time-torn England” most originally to India! He interprets the Indian and English societies and cultures with great intellectual incisiveness and precision. His prime inspiration for writing emanates from the depth of his conviction.

Chaudhuri’s credo was to lead a decent, disciplined, and examined life, to practise secularism, and not to worry about a life hereafter, which surrounds as a penumbra in the Indian Hindu psyche. He was a non-conformist, an iconoclast in his outlook on life and approach to writing. His unyielding mindset, shaped by intellectual and moral integrity, evidences strong moorings in the nineteenth century Bengali socio-cultural milieu characterized by a willing westernization through a regime of reading. The most dominant feature of his personality finds a reflection in his courage to swim against the current and on the strength of uncompromising principles. These qualities made him most individualistic, most singular in his generation.

It is no wonder that such an enfant terrible was, in turn, targeted by his countrymen to shoot sharp arrows at. However, the amount of censure hurled at him after the publication of his first book itself reveals the fact that they did not dispassionately analyze what he meant; maybe, they were preoccupied with what the post-
structuralists call "metaphysics of presence", which in this context denotes a presumptive idea of his being pro-British or anti-Indian. This is a hindrance to the proper reading of a text. The best way to read Chaudhuri is to approach him with an open and analytical, rather than a partisan and emotional mind. This helps one to fathom the depths of his thinking and erudition.

Chaudhuri, being an unconventional author, had always something unusual to say about life and things. Hence, his views on England and India are challenging and engaging. His appreciation of British life style and culture and his criticism of those of India simply result from his unconventional outlook. They are neither a manifestation of Anglomania nor an act of hatred or sedition. He was neither a blind admirer of England nor a hysterical hater of India. It is a queer combination that he was a passionate lover and a dispassionate critic. 'Anglomaniac Chaudhuri' or 'India-hater Chaudhuri' is an extreme assessment of only a portion of his work. The judgement in totality would not conform to this notion. What he really did is that he tried, as far as possible, to remain disinterested in his approach to a subject. With an objective outlook and an unprejudiced viewpoint, he tried to analyze, judge, and evaluate situations, people, and ways of life. These empowered him to assert his independence as an author in the teeth of opposition and formulate a philosophy of life regardless of the views of his countrymen.

It is necessary for a Chaudhuri reader to clearly get the distinction between Anglophile and Anglomaniac, the two appellations alternately used to refer to Chaudhuri. His Anglophilism
was not merely a mournful Empire nostalgia, nor was it a bare glorification of the British Raj or a sheer colonial cringing. It was, rather, a well-considered and enlightened response characterized by his quality of discretion and sense of judgement and reasonableness. It was developed by an inherent regard for high culture and its institutions, and an intense sense of timelessness. Chaudhuri applauded only those aspects of British life and culture, which are worthy of praise. He did not hesitate to lambaste the British people for their colonial barbarism and mean and contemptible behaviour towards the Indians. He has provided many authentic evidences of British people’s cruelty in India such as rape, killing, and massacre along with their collective barbarity, individual cowardice, moral degradation, sexual perversion, alcoholism etc. He went to such extremes in criticizing today’s Englishmen that he unhesitatingly called present Britain a corrupt civilization. The admirer in him mourned for the decay.

An evolution is evident in Chaudhuri’s attitude towards England. His childhood notion of England was an imaginative and glamorized one. It remained unaffected even after he got to England first, on a five-week trip. His feeling was rather heightened by that brief visit. His romanticized view of England however, started fading after he continued living there over the years. So, the more he came closer to England, the more he turned disillusioned with and critical of it. It is another story that his eternal love for ‘timeless England’ was unfading.

As for his attitude to India, the popular misinterpretation and the resultant resentment seem to do him injustice. It is not an internal
contradiction that his trenchant views on Indian people and their culture stemmed from his deep patriotic feeling, and his profound and everlasting love for Bengal and India. What distinguishes him from most of the Indian English writers is his vigilant and intimate acquaintance with the Indian literary and cultural traditions with all their strength and weakness. He took pride in being a survivor of Bengal Renaissance and grew quite fond of the Bengali literary figures like Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Bankim Chatterjee and Tagore. He developed the vision of ‘a permanent and basic India’, a ‘timeless India’ whose decadence he bemoaned. In addition, he turned critical of the Indians not as a master or an outsider, but wholeheartedly as one of them, as an insider with a reformist zeal, which amounts to self-criticism. In the same way, he praised the English and felt proud of their civilization not as a subordinate to them, but as one of them. He imaginatively identified himself with the people of England and thus, as an Indian English writer, presented faithfully the drama of British life. This is a kind of self-effacement. None of his kind seem to have achieved or even attempted such self-effacing stance.

The way Chaudhuri writes back to the British authority is not, of course, identical with the way the post-colonial writers write back to the center. Emanating from or dealing with the peoples and cultures of lands which have emerged from colonial rule, they tend to defy the enormous power of imperial cultural knowledge, as the phrase “the Empire writes back” denotes. So their writings result from the interaction between imperial culture and the indigenous cultural practices and become extremely critical and disparaging of
the colonial rule. Chaudhuri, too, has emanated from and dealt with the peoples and cultures of a land which emerged from the British colonial rule and his writings too, come out of Indo-British cultural encounter. In addition, he sometimes happens to be critical of the English people and culture. But all these do not necessarily correspond to the approach of the post-colonialists. Chaudhuri’s criticism of the British is simply a result of his deep resentment caused by his passionate love for their culture and civilization. It is heightened by their loss of imperial power, by their deviation from the Victorian tradition, and by their present state of indifference to their national destiny. He sincerely laments the decay. Any change from his stereotypical image of “timeless England” causes him much worry and he treats it as an expression of decadence. In fact, he seems to have been preoccupied with the idea of decadence, which works in him as what Jacques Derrida calls “an invariable presence”. Chaudhuri, therefore, sees decadence almost everywhere, all over the world, like a prophet of doom and reminds people of their lost glory.

Chaudhuri’s projection of India is not as intense as his projection of England. He mourns for England, grieves for her loss of imperial power, and dreams of a resurrection. But his feeling of worry about India is not as passionate, although he expresses concern over his countrymen sporadically. He does not seem to equally mourn for India, nor does he seem to be left with any hope for her revival. In other words, his vision of ‘timeless England’ far outshines his vision of ‘timeless India’. Besides, one notices that his projection of life in contemporary India is very sketchy and he has
no futuristic view on India. As it were, he appears either to avoid it deliberately or be unaware of it. In either case, it must be discounted as a limitation on the part of a mature writer as Chaudhuri is.

One notices a conspicuous desire in Chaudhuri to alienate himself from his fellow Indians. The reasons may be found in the religious culture and ideals of enlightenment observed by him in the earlier generation fed on English food. Besides, his migration from one place to another, from one country to another also gave birth to a feeling of separation. So, Chaudhuri, throughout his life, felt alienated from his fellow people both at home and abroad and turned an acerbic social critic and a tireless dissenter.

We have many instances of his biased opinions, rabid speculations, and cranky ideas which cannot be explained away. But the troubling elements in his work hardly overshadow his accomplishments. Those can be condoned in the final analysis by virtue of the total merit of his achievements both as a writer and an individual. He was perhaps the only major writer in contemporary India who wrote in two languages with equal ease and skill. What is interesting is that the man, Chaudhuri, in spite of his anger, eccentricities, idiosyncrasies, and carping attitude, is not a misanthrope at heart. He finally transcends all limitations and emerges as a great lover of humanity, a citizen of the world in the truer sense of the term. He is both a genuine Bengali and a genuine Englishman and displays a rare and queer combination—a perfect fusion of both Indian and British cultural spirit, a true synthesis between the East and the West.
That is not the total story. There are some major areas in the Nirad Chaudhuri canon that demand further exploration as independent, fullfledged studies. His dazzling linguistic competence, for instance, is a big and multifaceted issue, which can be an apt subject of research. His treatment of Indian history and culture especially Indian Renaissance can be another suitable subject of study. He brings fresh and original perspectives on them, which offer strong propositions for intellectual debates. Chaudhuri’s writings do not really fall in the “creative” category in the sense of literary, fictional creations. They are chiefly reflective, analytical, and argumentative. Appropriately, he never touched popular creative genres such as fiction, drama, even the personal essay. Even so, the writings display a liberal and profound use of literary devices of style, which can be independently taken up by an assiduous student of stylistics, as the output is voluminous.

Though Chaudhuri is a misunderstood and misread author, he possesses a tremendous relevance to our times. His importance as a thinker can be viewed in the context of India and Bangladesh relationship. A new generation of scholars, writers, and readers have started appraising his oeuvre with much interest and greater understanding in both the countries. The study is pertinent even globally with reference to the present social and cultural ambience, when the human situation in general is fast deteriorating, hatred rules the roost, and culture suffers at the hands of intolerance, sectarianism, fundamentalism, orthodoxy, and fanaticism. Chaudhuri’s writings on the whole, stand against ignorance, superstition, and dogmatism and invite the reader to involve his own reasoning faculty in them. Besides, in the post-colonial era, while
one-time colonized countries and their cultures are coming up with their own identity and heritage, Chaudhuri can contribute a great deal to a broader and deeper understanding of our own situation. His historical interpretation, cultural analysis, and literary criticism can help increase, heighten, and enrich our cultural awareness. Indeed, he stands as an outstanding product of the Indian Diaspora and his works open up a window not only on the Indo-English encounter, but on the total intellectual situation prevailing in our ‘global village’. In other words, to read Chaudhuri is to be intimates of a whole intellectual universe that needs to be protected and fostered at least in the academia.