

Apocalyptic vision in Amit Chaudhuri's Novel A Strange and Sublime
Address.

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Abstract

The present paper makes a systematic and thematic analysis of the novel "A strange Sublime Address" by Amit Chaudhuri. It expounds how far Amit Chaudhuri presents his apocalyptic vision of the Indian Society. This paper brings out the theme of apocalypticism, fragmentation and explores his fiction style, and concentrated on exploring the various aspects of local culture and its innumerable manifestation as portrayed in Chaudhuri's novel. His fictional dimension is restricted in as much as he has restricted himself to the depiction of the Bengali- Middle class and its culture. He is acutely viable to the power of literature as a channel of cultural signification. Its direct and contemporary significance rests in its competence to consider a conscientiously hybrid world where private interests and details take over public significance.

Key words:_____ Apocalypticism, Modernity, Globalization, Tradition, Postmodern society.

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1. Introduction

Apocalypse is a term used in religious and literary discourses for long time. It has its own complication in understanding its meaning and scope. It is derived from Greek word "Disclosure or revelation".

The word Apocalypse has more than a few meanings, in interpreting apocalyptic Literature, Richard A. Taylor and David M. Howard Jr. clearly state the difference between apocalypse and apocalypticism:

"Apocalypticism is a way of thinking. The difference between apocalypse and apocalypticism is this: while apocalypse is a genre of literature and requires written expression, apocalypticism

is essentially a way of thinking that may or may not produce a literature detailing such beliefs" (34).

Modernity as a part of apocalypse identifies the potential breakdown in socio-cultural relations and creative representation which offers ascend to a general feeling of anxiety from numerous historical and political reasons. It has turned into a boundless anxiety creative artists, economists, and political thinkers from around the turn of century.

In Henry Treeches "How I See Apocalypse", he lists the qualities of apocalyptic writings. He states his definition as follows:

The writer who senses the chaos, the turbulence, the laughter

and tears the order and the peace of the world in its entirety
is

an Apocalyptic writer (14).

2. Literature Review

Apocalyptic literature has some essential qualities. It manages mystery or hidden information which must be uncovered by heavenly means through dreams or visions from god or other – worldly mediators. The message of apocalyptic literature is conveyed in baffling enigmatical way through dark imagery and symbolism. It is a fantastic world of beasts, signs, hues, numbers and holy messengers appear to have worked as a sort of code which successfully imparted its message to a mystery gathering while at the same time disgusting the message from the uninitiated.

The present paper makes a systematic and thematic analysis of apocalyptic vision in Amit Chaudhuri's Novel "*A Strange and Sublime Address*". It expounds how far Amit Chaudhuri's modern outlook helps him to blend the apocalyptic vision of India in his novel.

The contemporary Indian English fiction has started espousing multiculturalism and pluralism in the cross- enrichment of notions and new patterns of cultural exchanges in the background of human's progression towards transnational social and cultural identity due to globalization. As a consequence, Indian literature in English has become an eminent portion of the international graph of literature. Tradition and culture play significant roles in the portrayal of Indians

in fiction .Scholars of Indian English novel consider it as alien and rootless to native culture.

Amit Chaudhuri also won several awards for the contributions to Indian Literature in English. In 1991, he was awarded the Betty Trask Award and Commonwealth writer's Prize for his "*A Strange and Sublime Address*".

Chaudhuri is yet another novelist of Indian origin for whom music is a significant inspiration. As a brilliant singer and head of a band, experienced in Indian classical music in a tradition named as Kunwar Shyam Gharana, he is most earnestly committed in music composing. He grows up in Mumbai where he lives through the outburst of rock music. Yet, since, Chaudhuri is a Bengali, the influence of Bengal scholars on his music and literature.

His fiction talks about the influential inclination of cultural and ancestral culture found in Indian society. Chaudhuri belongs to the upper middle-class, but he associates himself with the middle-class as he is intensely conscious of the distinctive traits of a protected middle-class life in India. His fiction is a pleasant reads, as it deals with people in real life and people in history.

Chaudhuri is very sincere about his passion of lyricism, imagery, and suggestiveness. His novels are a celebration of local cultures and subjectivities. His uniqueness as a writer, however, rests largely on the fact that his most sensitive evocation of locality are done through and exclusive focus on the ordinary and the quotidian in fragmented,

episodic form, never woven into holistic narrative, much less one about the development of the modern India.

Chaudhuri obviously secure a stature in the legion of born- in – India writers who stormed the citadel of the Indian English fiction with the impetus of their brilliance, ability and range. In his writings, there is a memorable composition of style, emotion, mood and evocation which differentiated him from other Indian born writers of this current millennium.

Chaudhuri on his own admission is a novelist who fascinates in the development of the unpretentious details of day-to-day life specifically the unremarkable incidents that go broadly unseen and the uneventful affairs that hardly find place in a traditional novel. He has a special gift for perceiving the details in any normal situation and to transit them into the pages of his books with vigor and passion. He prefers a narrative in which the myth, folk, images and symbols of Indian subcontinent establish a seamless whole.

Previous studies on Apocalyptic vision in John Ashbery's poem "*Where shall I Wander*" and Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih's "*The Yearning of seeds*" a comparative study in Dark Interior used as previous study to this research paper as well as Ashbery's apocalyptic transformation of the Self, its elevation to the Over-soul, is manifest to everyone and everything outside the Self, "*The voice of Prophecey in Ashbery's Poetry*" both these studies are used as previous studies in this research paper.

3. Analysis of Apocalyptic vision

Chaudhuri's debut novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address* makes a strange and sublime appeal to the inmost fibers of one's being with its raptly brilliant quality as Mandira Sen has observed in "Author work":

A strange and Sublime Address is Indian writing in English with a difference and alters the prevailing pattern. The novel reveals no parody or depiction of alienation or even an explanation of the mysteries of another culture to the west. It is a celebration of childhood, an authentic record written in an astonishingly luminous and lyrical prose that never loses its perfect pitch nor stumbles into sentimentality (8).

A Strange and Sublime Address is divided into two parts. The first is the world of children and their horseplay, and the second part is the world of elders especially when Sandeep's uncle accidentally suffers heart-attack and the arrival of relatives from the neighboring hamlets of Kolkata. The world of elders depicted from Sandeep's perspective. As there is no beginning, middle or end, the novel shares the element of the postmodern feature of fragmented narrative.

The mental process of the Socio-cultural identity in his fiction remains an apocalyptic vision of prime significance. It may be prudent or a bit tyrannical, but the fact remains that no author or dogma in

India can either deny or ignore the colonial reality which has influenced Indian society and culture in a very conceivable and energetic manner.

The novel captures middle class Kolkata, a metropolis of industrial and economic depression but with the rare cultural flavor, viewed through the eyes of Sandeep.

Along with Kolkata, Mumbai also refers as the symbol of disconcerting modernity. Mumbai serves as a fitting contrast. The probability of concept of Indianness' conceived on the differences within the culture sounds to Chaudhuri quite often an inadequacy leading to a sense of disorienting loss. Every account of novel has its fitting place. The conjuration of a child's world- view evidently affirms the writer's commitment with the base and origin of human life, and by extension, a vision of innocence purified by adult choices and attitudes. Thus local people provide a recollection of nostalgia which is concurrently led by a sense of dislocation and a sense of loss.

It seems to be autobiographical streak in the novel in as much as Sandeep bears adequate resemblance to the own childhood days of Chaudhuri. The novel has two themes—simple pleasures of childhood and the evocation of a life style—themes which are inevitably connected together.

The novel is filled with apocalyptic vision which is presented in minute details. Author comprises characters, houses, city, rituals, customs and social interplay. He seems to recognize with the ten year old boy Sandeep and tells the story from his view point. Accordingly

speaking, the novel has a thin plot and moves around day-today incidents and daily life. As Chaudhuri, himself admits in a very ingenious manner that there is not a storyline in the novel when he makes a remark about the portrayal of some house in streets.

The novel, portrays the everyday lives of middle – class people of the eastern part of India especially Kolkata, The novel opens with the influx of the child protagonist, Sandeep to his maternal uncle's home in Kolkata to spend his summer holidays. As a child of postmodern time, Chaudhuri juxtaposes the simple conventional life of Kolkata and the busy modern life of Mumbai can be regarded as microcosm for the change or growth that the other places of India would experience. It is the time, at which globalization and computerization competed with each other to excel in the Indian socio-political sphere. Indeed India gives way for both the factors and welcomed both for its fast evolving stages.

Sandeep to Kolkata and his everyday experiences in the city makes him remember the incidents and events forever and ever. When he comes to his maternal uncle, Chhotomama's house in Kolkata Sandeep is unwilling for the old house, old furniture and the middle class life of the house beginning. But instantaneously he begins to like them. The young psyche of Sandeep correlates his Modern house in Mumbai and the conventional house in Kolkata and that makes a sort of nostalgia for his Chhotomama's house in him. He loves the surroundings of Chhotomama's house in Kolkata.

Sandeep is the author's character who lauds tradition. The aroma of the mustard oil makes Chaudhuri to commemorate his own childhood – days spend in Bengal amidst its culture. So he pens in a Strange and Sublime Address:

----In Bengal, both tamarind and babies are soaked in mustard-oil,
and left upon a mat on the terrace to absorb the morning sun.
The
tamarind is left out till it dries up and shrivels into inimitable
flavor
and ripe old age; but babies are brought in before it gets too hot,
then bathed in cool water.(8)

Chaudhuri is contemptuous while criticizing the polluted city; however the tone is mild and sarcastic. He makes a comparison of modern art to that of the polluted city. Both the modern art and modern polluted city look alike for him. In modern art one can see different colors just blown on the entire surface of the picture to give it a shape- like appearance. Like this the dust formed on the articles gives them modern art like appearance.

Chaudhuri is inspired and fascinated by the myth of the old Bengal and its culture. He never misses a chance to highlight the image of Kolkata in all his works. He depicts the middle- class life of Kolkata of 1980s accurately with its flavor and color. For example, Sandeep mocks at his uncle when he makes all kinds of hassle while he is getting ready to go to office. Chhotomama with conventional lifestyle looks like other Indian middle-class men of 1980s and for Sandeep he is a prototype figure from whom he enjoys fatherly caring and guidance. The peculiar attitude in Chhotomama fascinated Sandeep who aspires to become a writer in future.

Author expounds expressively in the novel how middle class people spend their evenings. The neighbors of Chhotomama's house come alive when Sandeep and his cousins watch the neighbors from the veranda of their house. The elders of every house gather in the balcony in the evenings. Author has a bend of traditional mind. Hence he portrays traditional activities like singing Hindustani and dancing traditional dances of India like Bhartanatiyam, Kuchipadi and kathak enthusiastically in all his works.

As a modernist, author has a social consideration for Indian society. Being an Indian he is truly Indian in his nerve and blood. He contemptuously criticizes the society specifically the lower-class people and their illiterate behavior in their every attitude. Once the sweeper of Chhotomama's house comes and asks excuse himself for not coming for work for the past two days before. When he is inquired, he tells that his wife delivered his fourth baby two days before. Hearing this Sandeep's mother advises him to stop with four children.

When the novel is read, one may discover that he is moved between two worlds namely the world of images, colors, sounds, cadence and rhythms and world of poetry. It appears to the reader that he is fixed to the earth securely while his head is floating in the clouds. The author in his novel indeed has created the borderlines between the novel and poetry and makes his novel what is called "Strange Sublime".

Chaudhuri lucidly presents natural phenomena such as rain and storm, because the weather and ambiance of the place highlight it in particular terms. Yet, he renounces authorial interference again and lets the protagonist be himself. The nature is perceived in the novel from the perspective of a boy.

Sandeep sees the movement of trees and detects them dancing with the wind. The music of rain, wind and of the people speaking in the locality looks strange to him and acquired with a new meaning.

Chaudhuri foregrounds the insight of local language, Bengali as a cultural artefact, but in this too, he is humorous. For example, Sandeep's incapability of reading Bengali becomes comical incident, as he sees the letters as characters in both senses of the word. Not only the Bengali language but English language is also subjected to sarcasm in the novel.

Chaudhuri adopts sarcasm as a means to articulate circumstances in a sarcastic manner with an earnestness underlying it. Abhi's instructor is a source of fun and hilarity to the children. His English is horrible though he teaches Abhi English. Chaudhuri appears to ridicule him when he asserts that is delightful to hear his instinctive fluency and mastery in Bengali after his bold guerrilla invasion into the rugged province of English. Chhotomama's heart-attack becomes a chance for criticizing the society. His friends and relatives see him in hospital but end up debating about their children, relatives still sit talking, sipping now and then from flask, eating dry crunchy sweets from paper containers, shawls around their shoulders as if it were a picnic in a hill-station. Among the visitors, there are people who even ruminated whether Chhotomama has any chance to survival.

Chaudhuri tries to interconnect the global and the local in the novel with a commonness which serves to highlight the thematic focal point. The local is portrayed in this novel in its plurality, unveiling its multiple dimensions. The references to smells, sights, flavors, and collective rites make it obvious. Yet,

Chaudhuri remains most responsive to the cryptic, the marginal, and the banal aspects of day-to-day life.

In the novel, Sandeep views his direct atmosphere, his uncle's house and the streets of Kolkata as things infused with the trait of novelty, enchantment, or even magic. As aforementioned, the novel begins with the boy's view of his uncle's house in a Kolkata street where he finds small houses, unremarkable and unlovely, yet the boy's view changes this otherwise unremarkable place. Sandeep straddles the two worlds literally and more significantly imaginatively--- between Mumbai and Kolkata. In the interview to Sumana R. Ghosh Chaudhuri very honestly agreed:

I'm more interested in that kind of movement between two different worlds, this inner and outer, sometimes two incompatible cultural worlds which can be signified by the use of Shajana tree and Colgate toothpaste in the same sentence. So, that, is what I find has the movement of narrative (161).

The practice of religious customs stands in conspicuous contrast to the assimilated capitalist ideologies in the novel. Everywhere in the street, fathers pray for the success of their sons. No effort would be spared: "future" and career have become Bengali words, incorporated unknowingly but passionately into Bengali idiom. At the same time, children, like Egyptian slaves, dragged huge blocks of depressing study all day to construct that impressive but non- existent pyramid of success. This shows the acute desire for upward mobility and the spirit of cut throat competition in Bengali society. All of them seem to be busy in constructing the impressive but non-

existent pyramid of success. The fact that success is evasive renders their aggressive endeavors infertile yet, in spite of their aptitude for intellectual undertakings, Bengali society is presented here through a sarcastic view and their nostalgia for pre-capitalist past is privileged only to give a contrast to their reckless ambition for upward mobility in socio-economic conditions.

Thus, Chaudhuri creates a deeply sensuous world that goes beyond the postcolonial dichotomies of local and global; native and foreign; and west and east. His local domiciles are located in connection to broader view.

Thus Chaudhuri has tried to create a home for man rather than to be only creating a national literature. The day-today life, the specific, and the local become, in this idea of culture, facets of that making. The Kolkata comes alive with its sounds and sights, its gastronomic pleasures. The interplays of characters are real rather than realistic. They bear an impending simplicity and lyricism about them.

Every feature in the novel has its proper place and is intently connected to the child's world-view against adult choices and altitudes. For example, the loving rendering of Kolkata is blended with sarcastic realism. The city the characters inhabit is the "city of dust". The dust becomes an inclusive metaphor of a conspicuous aspect of this city, projecting the perspective of the spaces both private and public.

4. Conclusion

The apocalyptic vision used by Amit Chaudhuri is extremely painful while saying the changes that occurred in Indian traditional system because of the interference of many foreign invasions and westerners' entry and the arrival of western education. He believes that the traditional value have been

degrading day-by- day due to the many influences. Globalization is also one of the caused the amplified the loss of traditional values in India.

This paper explores apocalyptic vision on Amit Chaudhuri's novel A Strange and Sublime Address. The theme of apocalypticism and fragmentation are examined in detail such as apocalypse, apocalypticism and apocalyptic writing. A brief overview apocalyptic literature is presented. It describes how apocalyptic and postmodern go together in the contemporary literature. It lists the characteristics of apocalypse. The paper also analyzes the Amid Chaudhuri's message-fixation and the continuum of message crisis-crossing his novel and the subjects of his novel. Amit Chaudhuri's novel expresses a pessimistic view of the present state of the world, which is muted, consistently grim, empty, and culturally dead. This paper traces the evolution of apocalyptic thought hidden as the marrow of Amit Chaudhuri's novel. Amit Chaudhuri uses shifting narration to convey his ideas like Modern man's split thoughts and ideas. One can find the descriptions of isolated objects, situations, solitude, emptiness, and multiplicity in his novel. Author as a novelist also affected by the common human fever of fragmentation, isolation and dislocation of human consciousness in an urbanized world which asserts its irrational supremacy over human beings who are supposed to be rational animals. Here Amit Chaudhuri uses fragmentation for apocalyptic message through his novel. His narrative style has been influenced by Art and Art criticism.

To conclude, the present paper aims to capture the apocalyptic aspects in the novel of Amit Chaudhuri. In this aspect, A Strange and

Sublime Address can be regarded as an apocalyptic vision of postmodern fiction which presents the fast changing image of India.

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