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## Quest for Identity in Amit Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address*

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### **Abstract:**

Amit Chaudhuri's prize-winning first novel, *A strange and sublime Address* has achieved critical acclaim for its presentation of numerous unremarkable details of quotidian life. Though Chaudhuri belongs to the post 1980 period of Indian English Novel, he deliberately avoids magical realism of Salman Rushdie and presents the realistic stories of common people and depicts their day-to-day routine life. His debut novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address*, unconsciously deals with the theme of quest for identity of the protagonist, Sandeep who feels lonely in the cosmopolitan city like Bombay, whereas his second novel, *Afternoon Raag* consciously depicts the narrator's search for identity in an alien land. Sandeep, a ten year old boy of Bombay based wealthy Bengali family feels alienated, rootless and threatened in the high-rise modern apartment in Bombay. He comes to Calcutta with his mother during the summer vacations to visit his youngest maternal uncle, Mr. Jatin Das alias Chhotomama. As the novel is both personal as well as impersonal, the characters like Sandeep, Chhotomama, Mamima, (Chhotomama's wife) and Sandeep's mother are real life characters. The objective of this paper is to analyze and depict quest for identity of the protagonist, Sandeep and his Chhotomama, Mr. Jatin Das.

**Keywords:** identity, realism, quotidian, protagonist, alienation.

Amit Chaudhuri, like other contemporary South Asian novelists, explores the theme of quest for identity in his novels. However, he deliberately avoids magic realism, the form, practiced and made popular by Salman Rushdie and his followers. Instead, Chaudhuri depicts the theme of quest for identity by focusing on individual's domestic life in the public world. In other



words, Chaudhuri prefers domestic realism to Rushdie's magical realism. While commenting on Chaudhuri's themes, Purvi Shah observes:

Like other South Asian Authors, Chaudhuri attends to questions of identity, exile, and language, but he does so by following individuals through a larger domestic and public context. In Chaudhuri's view, such a perspective presents an alternative to fashionable images of India: ... While other South Asian authors have described the overwhelming impact of public history on the private individual – such as Saleem Sinai of *Midnight's Children* -Chaudhuri offers scenes of individuals living their lives, a method that gives glimpses of the public world in private terms. (33)

It is a fact that Chaudhuri writes about Indian people. It means he writes about people in history and the people he meets in society. The people like Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bosh and a few others appear and reappear in his novels. According to Chaudhuri, the Western ideas of an amazing India, where magical things keep happening, are not fit in his domestic realism. Hence, Chaudhuri avoids magical realism of Salman Rushdie and depicts the stories where “the folk, the mythic, realism and symbolism form a seamless whole” (Sengupta 219).

Chaudhuri's prize-winning debut novel, *A strange and sublime Address* has achieved critical acclaim for its presentation of numerous unremarkable details of quotidian life. He unconsciously analyses the identity of Sandeep, the protagonist of this novel, and depicts the “Myriad impressions of life etched vividly on the consciousness of Sandeep” (Dey 103). Sandeep, a ten year old boy, is the only child of Bombay based Bengali family. He feels alienated, rootless and threatened in the high – rise modern apartment in Bombay. He comes to Calcutta with his mother during the summer vacations to visit his youngest maternal uncle, Mr. Jatin Das alias Chhotomama. Sandeep is very eager and happy to go to Chhotomama's house because spending summer vacation in Calcutta means a lot of fun and pleasure in playing with his cousins. Besides, he will get the opportunity to enjoy the company of his relatives and to expose himself to things and places he has not visited before. While analyzing Sandeep's identity, Devika Bose observers:

Sandeep finds a great delight in this ancient house full of antique objects, old radios and out of fashion furniture and here he senses a kind of rootedness, a



strong bond between brother and brother, and brother and sister. Alone in Bombay, in his father's huge company flat, he feels too much foregrounded; lonely. Here, however, amidst the humdrum of life, amidst the not-so-important gossip of his aunt and his mother, he discovers a placid world, the world of a middle class Bengali, as it was lived in the seventies. (96)

The protagonist, Sandeep, is the only child of corporate, rich executive of a multinational company in Bombay. He lives alone with his parents in the large and luxurious flat in the high-rise apartment in Bombay. He has no company to play with or to share his emotions and feelings. Though his father's flat is large, luxurious and well kept, he feels lonely, rootless, threatened and miserable. On the contrary, in the old and unkept home of Chhotomama in Calcutta, Sandeep feels rooted, secure and happy. The narrator brings out the contrast between Sandeep's life in Bombay and the life he spends in his Chhotomama's house as he "gradually adjusted his senses to Chhotomama's house, to the pale walls, the spider webs in the corner, the tranquil bed sheets on the old beds and the portraits of grandfathers and grandmothers"(4). In Calcutta, Sandeep finds simple things in his Chhotomama's house different and attractive from the quiet and perfected apartment of his father in Bombay. Here he feels free, secure and comfortable in the company of his two cousins- Abhi and Babla, his uncles, his aunt, Mamima (Chhotomama's wife), his maternal grandmother and servants like Saraswati and Chhaya.

Though Chaudhuri focuses the theme of the celebration of simple joys of a childhood observing and enjoying the ordinary happenings of Sandeep's day-to-day life that forms the subjects like baths, meals, visiting relatives, shopping, playing games with his cousins, watching adults, religious rituals and household chores, he unconsciously develops Sandeep's identity as a writer. During their visit to one of the distant relatives, the young man asks Sandeep about his ambitions and aim in life. Sandeep, though hesitantly, answers that he is going to be a writer. He wants to write horror stories in English. While commenting on Sandeep's quest for identity as a writer, the narrator remarks:

Abashed and hurt, but trying to recover, he [relative] would ask:

'What will you be when you grow up?' It was Sandeep's turn to hesitate and he would say: 'A writer'... 'He writes in English; Abhi would reveal. ... 'English?' And what will you write when you grow up? 'Horror stories'. (17)



It clearly reveals that Sandeep is in search of his identity as a writer of horror stories. He wants to become an artist. While in conversation with Fernando Galvan, Chaudhuri makes clear that when he wrote this novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce was not in his mind. There is a similarity between Joyce's protagonist and Chaudhuri's protagonist who are in search for their identities as artists. However, in case of Sandeep, Chaudhuri has developed Sandeep's identity unconsciously. As Sandeep is just a ten year old boy who is interested in playing with his cousins and observing the life of the elder people in the house, there is no scope to develop his identity as a central character in the novel. As a result, Chaudhuri develops Mr. Jatin Das alias Chhotomama's identity as a businessman, as a staunch communist and a loveable father, uncle, and husband on a large scale. To Chaudhuri, Chhotomama and his identity as a typical middle class Bengali businessmen and a staunch communist is more important than Sandeep's identity as a writer.

Mr. Jatin Das is not a very rich person. He is the ordinary breadwinner of a middle class family. In Calcutta, he runs a small company that manufactures agricultural machinery. Every morning, except Sunday, he hurriedly prepares himself and goes to work in his old ambassador car. The narrator describes his routine life of going to work as:

In a White shirt and grey trousers, he [Chhotomama] would look like a different person. He would become an architect of that familiar figure... - the ordinary breadwinner in his moment of unlikely glory, transformed into the centre of his universe and his home. Over and again, he would shout, I'm late in the classic manner of the man crying 'Fire' or 'Timber' or 'Eureka', while Saraswati and Mamima scuttled around him like frightened birds. (15)

Though Mr. Das is very sincere and honest in his work and tries very hard to reach his company in time and devotes his full time in the company, his business is not profitable. The condition of his business is like the condition of his battered ambassador car. "There was no demand for this and no demand for that; this supplier had let him down; that partner was unscrupulous and lazy; the times were not conducive" (50). In short, money was short because Chhotomama is unable to earn a lot of money from his business. By this or that reason he suffers a loss. This is typical identity of the middle class Bengali businessman. He is not cunning and crafty like other businessmen who are very scrupulous about their business profits. The reason behind his failure in business may be his double identity as a communist and as a businessman.



The family members think that Chhotomama leads an unpredictable life. As a student, he decides to be a communist and plans to participate in the coming revolution which may change the life of common people. He has been very passionate, earnest and eager about the revolution but, unfortunately, the revolution fails, and his ambition is not fulfilled. The circumstances force him to do something different. Then he decides to be a businessman. He invests all his savings with a few friends, and they start a small company. But he lacks the skill and shrewdness of a businessman to exploit his workers and deceive his partners and suppliers to earn a lot of profits. As a result, “Chhotomama was far from affluent” (6). He has even no money to repair his car, buying a new car is far off thing. Every morning the car has to be pushed off by four-five boys and after a tiresome, hard job of pushing the car, the engine comes to life and then Mr. Das goes to his office. Chhotomama’s children, Mamima, Sandeep and number of neighbours watch the scene of pushing Chhotomama’s car. Mamima is fed up with the routine problem of the car. She prays that the car is started in the next morning without pushing it. Out of curiosity Sandeep, at lunch time, asks his aunt about her prayers as:

‘Mamima, what did you pray for today?’ ...

‘Oh, I prayed the car would start in the mornings’.

Didn’t you pray for the new car?’ Asked Abhi, a high-pitched inflection of disappointment in his voice. (37)

Mamima is quite aware of her husband’s financial condition. She knows that her husband is unable to afford a new car. So she does not pray for the new car but for the old car to be started in the mornings. Chhotomama is also fed up with the starting problem of his car. At last he sells his old car and goes to the office by bus or train. When he returns in the evenings, he looks soiled and tired due to standing in the crowded buses and numberless, undisciplined queues. In the course of time, his business, instead of making progress, turns worse. Thus, Chhotomama undergoes mental as well as physical stress due to his business tensions and travelling. His business worries and physical stress are responsible for pressure on his heart. It leads to hypertension that results into his heart attack. Fortunately, on the day Chhotomama suffers heart attack, Sandeep’s father with his family has been in Calcutta. Immediately Chhotomama is taken to hospital in Sandeep’s father’s company car. There he gets proper treatment at the right time. As a result, he survives and comes back to his house in a cheerful mood.



Like Sandeep's identity, Chaudhuri unconsciously develops Chhotomama's identity as a middle class Bengali Communist. Mr. Das is a well educated person who has passed his B. A. (Hons.) with first class. He is a staunch Marxist thinker. Even through reading of the daily newspaper, his Marxist ideology is reflected. According to the narrator, the Marxist bend of his personality is clearly noticed as "he read the significant news of the day; he pondered on 'world affairs and home affairs'; he pontificated to himself on the 'current situation' from a Marxist angle" (52). It shows that he is a water-closet communist thinker. So far as his political ideology is concerned, Chhotomama is pro-communist and anti-congress, though he welcomes "Modern" India – Nehru's secular India, free of ritual and religion" (66). He does not believe in gods and goddesses but loves the rituals and festivals and loves the taste of the sweets prepared to offer to gods and goddesses.

Chaudhuri further brings out Chhotomama's communist philosophy, when he gives a lecture to the children – Sandeep, Abhi and Babla – busy in playing the game of freedom fighters. While expressing his views about Subhash Chandra Bose and Mahatma Gandhi, he appreciates the patriotism of Subhash Chandra Bose with pride and criticizes Gandhi with a contemptuous smile as "Sham Yogi, who knew no economics" (79). But Sandeep praises Gandhi as the Father of the Nation. This praise of Gandhi makes him furious. As a staunch communist, he gives lecture to the children on history of pre-Independence India and contribution of freedom fighters as:

Eyes burning, Chhotomama began to lecture them on pre-independence Indian history, quoting several historians of several nationalities. As he spoke to the children, he behaved like a scholar at a seminar addressing a group of inimical scholars who had views hostile to his own. ... he saw, in front of him, three conservative, pro-congress intellectuals. He began to revile Gandhi, the Father of the Nation, ... He began to defy Subhas Bose, the brilliant side tracked Bengali. ... He spoke with true pride of SubhasBose, pride shone in his eyes, the pride a son feels when he remembers a calumniated father. (79-80)

Although Mr. Jatin Das is a staunch Marxist, a revolutionary and non-believer in god, he is a loveable father, an affectionate uncle and a dutiful husband. He takes every care of his family and tries hard to provide all comforts to them, including good food and other necessities of life. Chhotomama not only provides his family and children the basic necessities of life but



also takes care of their feelings and intellectual development. He wants his children to be successful in their lives. He admits his eldest son Abhi into an English School from Bengali. As he knows that Abhi is going to face difficulties, he appoints a special teacher to teach him English. He also promises him to give new cricket bat because he knows that his children like cricket like their father. In the hospital, when he finds Sandeep in a nervous mood, he encourages him in cheerful words and tries to make him happy and forget his uncle's illness. While bringing about Chhotomama's efforts to change Sandeep's melancholy mood, the narrator observes:

'What have you been doing Mona?'

'Nothing'.

'Have you seen any films?'

'No'.

'Have you read any books that are interesting?'

'No'. Then, thoughtfully and shyly, he added, 'There's going to be a Book Fair next week in the Maidan. We are going to go there'. (116)

Chhotomama knows that Sandeep likes to read books, and as he is admitted in the hospital, there is nobody to take the children for an outing. He suggests him to devote his time in reading books which may have a healing effect on his ailing mind. He is also affectionate to his sister, Sandeep's mother and other relatives. He spares time to take them for a walk, to visit fair, to visit relatives, to do shopping and so on. In the hospital, he gets a lot of time to think about his past and future. The novel ends with an optimistic note as Chhotomama recovers from illness and sees his bright future and decides to start his life again. The narrator, while analyzing his mind, writes:

Slowly, he came to realize that it was his future he was looking at. There it was, bright and tangible, with the sunlight falling on it peculiarly ... He would have to start all over again, he told himself. ... All over again, he told himself, from the beginning ... Especially for the children. He had married late, he had begun life late. He had responsibilities to his wife, years younger than him, he had responsibilities towards his children. They were, after all, still children. (121)

Chhotomama's stay in the hospital gives him ample time to think about his life, his wife and his children. From the above quote, it is found that he is fully aware of his responsibilities as the head of the family. Henceforth, he has to be a responsible husband and father and think about



better future of his wife who is younger to him and his two sons who are still children. Thus, Chaudhuri in a skillful manner brings out Chhotomama's identity not only as a middle class Bengali businessman and a staunch Marxist but also as an affectionate uncle and brother, a loveable father and a dutiful and caring husband.

Besides Chhotomama's identity, Chaudhuri also unconsciously develops identity of Chhotomama's wife, Mamima as a traditional, dutiful, and a good housewife as well as a caring and loving mother. As there is no space for Feminism in Chaudhuri's writings, the feminine gender identity of his women characters is not fully explored in his novels. Most of his women characters are good, dutiful, housewives and caring, loveable mothers who are always busy in rituals and routine household affairs. In patriarchal Indian family system women are treated as the objects in the house. They are as important as the furniture and the other amenities in the house. Chaudhuri severely criticizes the patriarchal Indian family system where the women are not identified with their names, but their relationship with other persons in the family. In this novel, the two important women characters are identified by their relationship with other persons. For example, Sandeep's mother is identified as 'Didi', or 'Sandeep's mother' and Sandeep's aunt as Chhotomama's wife or 'Mamima'. The name of a person is important because it establishes one's identity in the society. These women play an important role, but they are treated as the important objects in the house. Their existence is not more than that of objects or useful articles in the house. As Chaudhuri believes in the patriarchal Indian family culture and as he is against the feminist movement, he does not allow his female characters to assert themselves as independent women. They do not have an independent identity as free and strong women. In the patriarchal Indian family system, they are just service providers. Their role is that of attendants who help the males in the house who go out for jobs or business. Mamima is one of them. In a typical middle class Indian family, housewives like Mamima are always busy in cleaning the house, cooking for the family, bathing the children and preparing them for school. Some women who are fed up with the bindings of the patriarchal Indian family system revolt against it and try to assert themselves as independent women. But, Chaudhuri's most of the women characters like Mamima are happy in playing the role of traditional housewives.

Thus though Chaudhuri succeeds in portraying Sandeep's quest for identity as a writer and Chhotomama's identity as a Bengali businessman and a staunch communist, he fails to explore the identity of Mamima as a strong independent woman. On the contrary, he succeeds in



putting forth his antifeminist views by casting Mamima's character as a traditional housewife who enjoys her responsibility as a care taker of the family.

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