

## QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN AMIT CHAUDHURI'S *AFTERNOON RAAG*

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Amit Chaudhuri, a rising voice in Indian English novel, explores the theme of quest for identity in his novels. His second novel *Afternoon Raag* (1993) which has also won two prizes is set in Oxford, Bombay and Calcutta. It is about the loneliness of an Indian student at Oxford who shifts from Oxford to Bombay and from Bombay to Calcutta. The novel is titled as *Afternoon Raag*; the 'raag' (a piece of classical Indian music) that is played just before evening and the whole novel gradually unfolds the narrator's love for music. In this novel Chaudhuri explores the protagonist's quest for identity as a classical singer. The novel depicts the narrator's failure in achieving his ambition. First, his quest for identity as a classical singer is not fulfilled due to the untimely death of his beloved music teacher. Secondly, his quest for identity as a lover comes to an end because of his dilemma and confused state of mind in choosing one of the two girls he meets during his stay in oxford.*

**Key Words:** *quest, identity, protagonist, obsession, memories, ambition, dilemma.*

**QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN AMIT CHAUDHURI'S *AFTERNOON RAAG*****-DR. GANPATRAO BABURAO PATIL**

**A**mit Chaudhuri, like other contemporary South Asian novelists, explores the theme of quest for identity in his novels. But 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 a public world. In other words, Chaudhuri prefers domestic realism to Rushdie's magical realism. Chaudhuri's second novel *Afternoon Raag* (1993), which has also won two prizes, is set in Oxford, Bombay and Calcutta. It is about the loneliness of an Indian student at Oxford who shifts from Oxford to Bombay and from Bombay to Calcutta. The novel is titled as *Afternoon Raag*; the 'raag' (a piece of classical Indian music) that is played just before evening and the whole novel gradually unfolds the narrator's love for music. His obsession with music is matched by his equally obsessive memories and hallucinations of home and the past. The 'raag' of the title is not only an allusion to the musical tastes of the narrator, but it also refers to the very substance of the novel and its poetic, musical prose. In this novel Chaudhuri explores the protagonist's quest for identity as a classical singer. Chaudhuri continues his search for the self and belonging that draws from his own life history. The novel depicts the narrator's failure in achieving his ambition. First, his quest for identity as a classical singer is not fulfilled due to the untimely death of his beloved music teacher. Secondly, his quest for identity as a lover comes to an end because of his dilemma and confused state of mind in choosing one of the two girls he meets during his stay in Oxford.

Chaudhuri's second novel, *Afternoon Raag*, like his first novel *A Strange and Sublime Address* is semi-autobiographical. It is both personal as well as impersonal. Characters like Sandeep and Chhotomama in *A Strange and Sublime Address* and the Narrator and his mother in *Afternoon Raag* are real life characters. Sandeep and the Narrator are Chaudhuri's personas. Yet he rejects the views of the critics that his first two novels are

autobiographical. While in conversation with Sumana Ghosh, Chaudhuri says, 'I am not an autobiographical writer. I copy down texts which already exist. For me sometimes reality is the text; it has a textuality about it.' (172) Chaudhuri is a keen observer of life. He has selected the characters from his personal real life experiences in India as well as in abroad.

Chaudhuri's *Afternoon Raag* depicts the narrator's love of songs and classical music. Rini Dwivedi, while praising this novel for its close relationship to music, observes:

His *Afternoon Raag*, which has been eloquently praised by reviewers, is a unique work, as unique as G. V. Desani's *All About H. Hatterr*, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* can be. It is perhaps the first novel that tries not to accept any frontiers between music and the novel. (78)

In this novel Chaudhuri explores the protagonist's quest for identity as a classical singer. According to Purvi Shah "Chaudhuri continues his search for the self and belonging in another work that draws from his own life history, his second fictional piece, *Afternoon Raag* (34). The novel is titled as *Afternoon Raag* because the raag, in Indian classical singing tradition, is played just before evening. Devika Bose, while analyzing the role of music in this novel, observes:

The whole rests on the gradual unfolding of the narrator's love for music, his first lessons with his guru Govind Jaipurwale, his guru's expert rendering of the different ragas, the name of the different ragas and the hours allocated to them, the narrator buying his first tanpura. (100)

The novel opens with a poem entitled 'Afternoon Raag' in which the narrator narrates the scene of his music teacher's arrival in their home and teaching his mother classical singing. In this poem Chaudhuri compares raag with a 'spacious mansion' 'the great architecture' that creates the clear archway of notes. The narrator has written this poem in honour of his music teacher Pandit Govind Prasad Jaipurwale. It 'celebrated the various moods (or rasas) that different ragas induce in their listeners at different times of the day and night' (Kaul 3). Chaudhuri has an insider's firsthand experience and deep

knowledge of Indian classical music. He has learnt it from his mother's music teacher. Besides he gets the gift of love for music from his mother as an inheritance. His keen interest in classical singing and love for music force him to learn classical singing. He takes lessons of classical singing from his 'guru' and starts practicing various ragas. The poem written in the memory of his guru explores a lot about his teacher's life, his personality, his style of singing, his family including his wife, his children, his brother and brother-in-law and their wives and children. It also depicts his teacher's illness and the untimely death which makes the narrator melancholy.

As the writing of the novel is inspired by the death of his music teacher, the narrator narrates a few important incidents in the life of his teacher that brings out the narrator's quest for identify as a classical singer. The narrator has decided to be a classical singer. He starts practicing ragas with his mother. He, however, wants to establish his own identity as a classical singer. So he decides to buy his first tanpura. He gets his own tanpura and enjoys the lessons by playing it under the guidance of his guru. Chaudhuri vividly narrates the experience of taking lessons and buying the narrator's first tanpura as:

It was on an afternoon in August I bought my first tanpura. We were visiting Calcutta then, and my music teacher, my guru, had come with us and was living in our house; he was going to sing at a 'conference'. He would practice in the mornings, ... On some mornings we would sing raag Bhairav together, our two voices and styles mingling closely and floating over the other sounds of the house... his voice sometimes carrying my hesitant voice, and negotiating the pathways of the raag, as a boat carries a bewildered passenger. In the moments of simple imbibing, I would forget my voice was my own and become an echo of his style and artistry. (28-29)

In this manner the narrator learns classical singing from his music teacher. While taking lessons, he comes to know that the greater part of the understanding of a raag consists in a slow evasive introduction in which the notes of the ragas are related to each other. While commenting on the narrator's visit with his music teacher to the tanpura shop, Chaudhuri observes:

That afternoon, we took the car to Rashbehari Avenue. My guru was dressed as usual in a loose white kurta and pyjamas. It must have been six or seven years before his death, and he must have just turned forty. ... We walked to the shop, no bigger than a room, called Hemen and Co. Ascending the three steps, we saw unfinished tanpuras and sitars, long patient necks and the comical but graceful distended round urns; ... My tanpura was ready with its four new strings; I remember the tentative shyness with which I touched it. (29-30)

The music teacher not only helps him in buying the tanpura but also teaches the narrator how to tune the instrument and how to hold it vertically on the lap and lay it horizontally on the ground. He also learns that the four strings of tanpura provide only two notes as a background to the song. The first note is the mother note, the origin of all other notes and the second note, the father note, which depends on the raag, is circumstantial but constructive. In this way, the narrator says that he learns everything about the tanpura and then "That afternoon, my guru and I, like patient surgeons, tuned the tanpura till the room filled with notes "Shadja" and "nikhad" ' (Chaudhuri 31).

After taking lessons in classical singing, the narrator goes to Oxford for higher studies. He carries with him his beloved tanpura which gives him company in his loneliness. As and when he feels lonely and homesick, he practices ragas by playing the tanpura. He remembers that his mother too settles on the rug and practices ragas by playing harmonium. Whenever he practices raag or hears classical music, he becomes nostalgic and the picture of his guru singing with his brother and Sohanlal flashes in front of his eyes. He writes:

When I hear the raag Maand, I think of my guru and his brother and Sohanlal, for it bears the characteristics, the stamp, and the life of their region. Their faces, their language, the colour of their skin, the cotton clothes they wear, are set and have their meaning against the same landscape. (Chaudhuri 106-107)

The narrator also remembers the classical music gathering organized by his music teacher in memory of his guru's father's spiritual teacher. His guru invites the narrator as well as

his mother to sing in the gathering. Thus the narrator gets opportunity to sing in a public programme and establish his identity as a classical singer. He might have got more opportunities like this but, unfortunately, his guru dies and the relationship between the student and the teacher is broken. He gets the news of his guru's death when the narrator was in Oxford. He feels lonely and forlorn. He knows that though there are two persons, his guru's brother and Sohanlal to guide him, his ambition to become classical singer will not be fulfilled. Thus, the narrator's quest for identity as a classical singer remains unfulfilled.

Besides the narrator's identity as a classical singer, Chaudhuri also explores the narrator's identity as a lover. During his stay in Oxford for higher studies, the protagonist establishes intimate relations with two girls – Mandira and Shehnaz. In the very first chapter Chaudhuri brings out the dilemma of the narrator in choosing one of the two girls. The narrator expresses his feelings about the two girls as:

The intuition of water came to me again when I was visiting Worcester College; it was an unhappy day, because I was still vacillating between Mandira and Shehnaz, falling asleep by one woman at night and spending the day with the other.  
(Chaudhuri 2)

Like the narrator, Shehnaz also comes to Oxford for higher studies. The freshmen and women feel lonely and homesick. In order to get rid of this feeling of alienation, they are in search of a company. Shehnaz, Mandira and the narrator are no exception to this search for the right company. While commenting on Shehnaz's search for the right company, Chaudhuri remarks :

She was essentially, a lonely person searching for the right company, a wise little girl in a woman's body, dressed in black trousers, a blue top and a coat, and black sneakers. Her hair was long and striking and untidy; solemnly, she carries a file full of papers under her arm, and a clumsy, oversized bag ... She had been married once, very briefly and then divorced; later, she had an involvement in Oxford which came to nothing. (6)

The narrator through a friend meets Shehnaz at the right time when her involvement in Oxford comes to an end. She develops her friendship with the narrator thinking that the Indian student will be a right company for her. They have accepted each other as friends and continued their meetings. Their friendship develops into a relationship of a lover and beloved. Shehnaz loves the narrator passionately, and she offers herself to him. They have sexual intercourse in the room of Shehnaz as the narrator says, 'on that afternoon When Shehnaz lay on her bed and I unbuttoned her Shirt' (Chaudhuri 64). Though their union is physically successful and Shehnaz loves him passionately, the narrator is in a confused state of mind. He is not sure that he is emotionally attached to Shehnaz. His identity as a true lover is in question because about at that time he falls in love with a Hindu girl called Mandira.

Mandira, like Shehnaz and the narrator, comes to Oxford for higher study. She lives in a college among under graduate students. At the beginning she has tried to mix with the crowd of students scattered through the colleges of Oxford but later her life becomes lonely. So like Shehnaz, she was in search of the right company to drive away alienation from her life. During that time the narrator comes in contact with her. And their relationship as a lover and a beloved develops. While expressing his views regarding their love affair, the narrator observes:

It was about at that time that things began between Mandira and myself, without either of us knowing where they would lead to. She would lock her door and come and sit beside me on the bed. If one of her friends happened to knock, and call out, 'Mandira', we would both be silent'; ... She wanted very much to make love to me, and at night, after switching off the light, she would lie, small and warm, underneath her blankets. She was completely new to love, unexpectedly bold in her various pleas and demands, and ashamed at the wrong moments. Our blinded groupings were more exploratory than passionate, for both of us afraid of what was supposed to happen at the end of this act. (Chaudhuri 70)

From the above views of the narrator it is found that Mandira and the narrator are deeply in love with each other. Yet the narrator is doubtful about the end of their love. Here

we see a triangle of love. Shehnaz is in love with the Narrator and the Narrator is in love with Mandira. They are not sure whether they are true and sincere in their love but they have succeeded in driving away alienation from their life in Oxford. As the Narrator writes, "Shehnaz, Mandira's room, the walks taken together, a meeting with Sharma reassure one that one has not been in Oxford alone" (Chaudhuri 73).

The narrator is in dilemma about his love for Mandira and Shehnaz. He is unable to decide with whom he is going to continue his love relationship. Though he fails to keep promises given to Mahindra, she loves him passionately. She wants to possess him and discover herself through the narrator. The narrator fails to satisfy her demands. He says:

And then there was her wish to discover through me, herself, for her a heartfelt but simple demand, for me almost impossible to comply. She would have had me possess her, to commit to extinction both our selves, while I always held back, selfishly, on the brink, refusing to take refuge inside her. (Chaudhuri 99)

As the narrator doesn't respond to Mandira's passionate love, she has a spell of depression. She decides to postpone her final exams and moves out of college. In this way the Narrator's love relationship with Mandira comes to an end. Here his quest for identity as a lover of Mandira comes to an end.

So far as his love relationship with Shehnaz is concerned, we notice the similar negative attitude of the narrator. He decides not to meet Shehnaz. But Shehnaz loves him passionately. When she finds him missing, she visits Sharma's room and lingers there longer with the expectation of his arrival. The narrator holds back selfishly and avoids meeting Shehnaz who becomes nervous. Fortunately, Shehnaz, unlike Mandira, recovers from her depression and successfully faces her final exams and moves to America. When the narrator returns to Calcutta, he writes a letter to Shehnaz, probably asking forgiveness or wishing to renew his love relationship to her. But as he is still in a confused state of mind and unable to take decision, he decides not to send the letter. In this way, his love relationship with Shehnaz also comes to an end. Once again, his quest for identity as a successful lover of Shehnaz also comes to an end.



According to Chaudhuri love relationship among students are not permanent. It has no permanent place in their life. That is the reason behind the narrator's failure in both the love relationships. While commenting on the temporal and transitory nature of love, especially in Oxford, Chaudhuri remarks:

To be someone's lover, to share someone's bed, does not help, but only disturbs that fragile configuration of events and meeting, ... This is in part an effect of knowing that one's relationship with one's lover could have only taken place in Oxford, and has no meaning outside it, and that Oxford itself is a temporal and enchanted territory that has no permanence in one's life. (67-68)

Thus, the narrator fails in achieving his ambition by fulfilling his quest for identity as a classical singer as well as a lover. First, his quest for identity as a classical singer is not fulfilled due to the untimely death of his beloved music teacher. Secondly, his quest for identity as a lover comes to an end because of his dilemma and confused state of mind in choosing one of the two girls with whom he has love-relationship for couple of years.

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