

ANALYSING MUSIC AND FOOD AS THE IMPORTANT THEMES IN AMIT CHAUDHURI'S NOVELS

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Abstract: Theme is defined as a main idea or an underlying meaning and message of a literary work that may be stated directly or indirectly. It is usually universal in nature and is very essential in order to have meaningful writing. Themes or thematic concerns are issues or concepts covered by works of literature and works of art. Such concepts are intentionally discussed, portrayed or promoted by the author or artist in their works. Various techniques including literary, punctual, advertising, film and visual are used to demonstrate the text's thematic concerns. The thematic consideration and analysis of problems of common man with ordinary prudence and their existence is the core of five novels under study. The themes in five novels, *A Strange and Sublime Address*, *Afternoon Raag*, *Freedom Song*, *A New World*, and *The Immortals* of Amit Chaudhuri are under study which varies in many folds.

Keywords: Food, Music, Themes, Techniques, literary, etc

I. INTRODUCTION

Theme is defined as a main idea or an underlying meaning and message of a literary work that may be stated directly or indirectly. It is usually universal in nature and is very essential in order to have meaningful writing. Themes or thematic concerns are issues or concepts covered by works of literature and works of art. Such concepts are intentionally discussed, portrayed or promoted by the author or artist in their works. Various techniques including literary, punctual, advertising, film and visual, are used to demonstrate the text's thematic concerns. The thematic consideration and analysis of problems of common man with ordinary prudence and their existence is the core of five novels under study. The themes in five novels, *A Strange and Sublime Address*, *Afternoon Raag*, *Freedom Song*, *A New World*, and *The Immortals* of Amit Chaudhuri are under study which varies in many folds. However various thematic aspects of life are figuring in all the five novels of Chaudhuri. The writer has endeavoured to create new thematic elements in his novels where the reader or critic is left to exercise his mind and intellect to find out what is the true meaning of nationalism, cultural and cross religious, clashes, different religious, faith and belief and migration of people taking place out of political ideologies changing from time to time.

Chaudhuri belongs to this category of writers and depicts Bengali culture and its people in his novels. His novels throw light on themes like relationship, culture, music, food etc. The region plays an important role in the development of the narrative and characterization. His region, Calcutta participates in the works of Chaudhuri with all its respects that are nature, culture, legends, customs, conventions, superstitions, topography, and environment. He describes farmers, businessmen, labourers, fairs, market places, river bridges and sea, the backwardness and superstitions of the local people, rustic songs and dances and Bengali dishes, etc. all with a wide knowledge and acute feeling because he has known them intimately. Hamlin Garland in his essay "New Fields" in *Crumbling Idols* writes:

A new literature will come with the generation just coming to manhood and womanhood on the coast. If rightly educated, their eyes will turn naturally to the wheat-fields, the forests, the lanes of orange-trees, the ranges of unsurpassed mountains. They will try to express in the novel, the drama, in painting, and in song, the love and interest they take in the things close at hand. This literature will not deal with crime abnormalities, nor with deceased persona. It will deal, I believe, with the wholesome love of honest men for honest women, with the heroism of labor, the comradeship of men, - a drama of average types of character, infinity varied, but always characteristic. (28)

One of the important themes in the works of Chaudhuri is Music. It is the eternal sense of Indian classical music which inspires Chaudhuri the most, and his preoccupation with music can be seen in his novels such as *Freedom Song*, *Afternoon Raag*, and *The Immortals*. His love for music can be clearly visualized in *The Immortals*. He puts high premium on the music by treating it as a means to achieve sublimity and immortality. He is personally interested in North Indian Classical music and has few albums to his credit. Though his love of music is intense, he does not claim to be a professional. He affirmed this in an interview with Sumana R. Ghosh:

Music is an important constituent of the culture or family I grew up in.... However, I discovered classical music for myself.... I've become interested in Indian Classical music as a subject.... I've become interested in music and the world of capital, music, art and the marketplace. But I have to say that I'm not conscious of the analogies between my narrative technique and Indian classical music. (176-77)

In Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address*, The delicious Bengali cuisine also forms an important constituent of the state's cultural heritage. The culture of West Bengal is considered to be one of the richest in India. Apart from boasting of its immense contribution in reformation movements, the state also takes the credit for being the pioneer of cosmopolitan culture in the country. Over the years, the culture of West Bengal has emerged as the perfect blend of modernity and traditions. The sanctity of Hooghly river, the beauty of Eastern Himalayas, the diversity of Sunderbans and the freshness of the tea gardens, all blend together to constitute the unique culture of West Bengal. Bengali culture also has its root in Bengali music, cinema and literature.

The culture of Bengal in Chaudhuri's novels is shown through food also. Food is an important theme in his novels. He describes every meal whether it is breakfast, lunch, tea, or dinner. The main focus of the novelist is on the way the people eat. The people in the novel eat their food in simple and traditional way. They sit together and eat together like having tea: "There were cups of tea on the tray, and three tumblers of milk for the boys. There was also a small, earthen pot with dark, fried sweetmeats, each an orb, dipped in syrup" (21). The Chhotomama's family members would eat their meals with hands as Bengalis prefer to eat their food with hands. They would even eat the fish without leaving the bones, "They went on eating, inspecting the fish, searching for the fishbones, the tiny, tiny fishbones. Babla sat with his mouth open, into which his mother put little balls of fish and rice" (34). Bengalis love sweets a lot. They even love to gift sweets to their loved ones. Bengali sweetmeats and a pot of sweetened pink yoghurt are the special delicacies of Bengal. Once, Chhotomama with his family had to visit his relatives, an old couple. He bought the sweetmeats and yoghurt from the Ganguram's shop at Gol Park. The sweetmeats and sweetened pink yoghurt were packed in earthen pots and served on the plates made from leaves. It is the traditional way of serving and eating the food. The sweets bought by Chhotomama for his relatives were a kind of token of love. Sandeep also accompanied his Chhotomama and discovered:

The sweetmeats and the yoghurt came in pots of red earth. All round them, people were eating from these pots and from plates made of leaves. The pots and plates would have to be discarded, sadly, once the meal was over. Sandeep remembered the civilization of Mohenjodaro, which he had learnt about at school; there, too, people had eaten from rudimentary but graceful utensils which they had thrown away after use. (52)

In the evening when Chhotomama would come home, he would have the smallest, simplest meal a Bengali can have, 'a small simple meal of yoghurt with sugar' (87). This would remind him of his childhood and his mother. It would remind him of the warmth of his mother's fingers as if he was having the meal prepared by his mother's hand. Besides, loving and respecting, they also cared for each other. Care is a gesture in which one shows concern for the other. Once Chhotomama had a heart attack and everyone got scared. He was taken to the hospital where he was told that he had just the acidity problem but has to stay in the hospital for complete checkups. Sandeep's father, his mother left the Grand Hotel at Chowringhee and came to Chhotomama's place to stay with other family members of the house. Sandeep's father who never spent a day at this house also thought of spending time with other family members. This showed that he cared for the family of Chhotomama. After few days Chhotomama was shifted to the ward and Mamima and Sandeep's mother were allowed to bring food from home which filled the hospital room with the aroma of Bengali food, "freshwater rohu fish cooked in a tablespoon of oil, with no salt or spices, but with a hint of turmeric and a mild seasoning of black jeera seeds for flavouring and colour" (100).

Chaudhuri's *Afternoon Raag* is a semi-autobiographical novel and is a first person narration by a student about his university days. It is dedicated to the late Govind Prasad Jaipurwale, from whom he learnt classical singing. In an interview published in *The Hindu* Amit Chaudhuri asserted to Hasan Suroor, "I experienced my 'Indianness' as something that expressed itself powerfully through Hindustani classical music" (Web). The novel talks about his stay at the university and his nostalgia for his parents and his homeland, Calcutta. Music is an important theme in Chaudhuri's novels. The narrator has liking for Indian classical music. The novel starts with a poem in memory of his music teacher who used to teach him and his mother. It is clear from the title of the novel and the poem in the memory of Pandit Govind Jaipurwale as a prologue, the novel is about an afternoon raga. The narrator and his guru shared a guru-shishya relationship in a traditional sense. He even taught him to tune instruments and also how to hold a Tanpura, musical instrument. The narrator and his guru had also visited some places together for some musical concerts. Once they had to go for a concert to Calcutta, music teacher also accompanied them. They would practise raags mixed with the voices of pigeons and other members of the family. Narrator's guru, Sohanlal taught him different types of raags and their significance and even taught him at what time these raags are sung:

Each raag has its time of day, a cluster of hours called 'prahar', or its season. Goud Sarang and Shudh Sarang are sung at midday, while Madhuvanti is sung in late afternoon verging on twilight, Purvi and Shree from dusk to early evening, and in late evening, Abhogi Kanhra. Midday brings the smell of ripening jackfruit, the buzz and gleam of bluebottle flies, the fragrance of mango blossoms which, Tagore said, opens the doorways to heaven. (259)

The narrator loved everything about his mother and even the way she used to eat food. His father observed all the table manners, always used a fork and a spoon to eat. He would not start his food until he was served properly. They were fond of

Bengali food and would prepare Bengali food especially fish at home. Rice and fish are traditional favourite food of Bengalis. Bengali's vast collection of fish based dishes includes preparations, a favourite among Bengalis. Bengalis are famous for various preparations of fresh water fishes. The cuisine is rich in specialized spices and flavours giving unique tastes. The Bengali meals include fish curry prepared with spices and chillies. The Bengalis are perhaps the greatest food lovers and they eat their food with their hands. Neither table spoons nor chopsticks are used as an aid to pass on the food to the mouth. The fingers appreciate all the various mashed vegetables or the different kinds of rice or varieties of fish before they enter the mouth. The parents of narrator were food lovers and he liked the way his mother used to eat food like a cat. According to the narrator:

When I think of food, I think of the cat-like way my mother disposes of fish-bones, and eats the head of the rohu fish, meticulously destroying its labyrinths. Here a silent contest ensues, as she chews and bites at it from all sides, till the head disappears and the indigestible bones lie clean and polished on one corner of the plate. At dinner, our leftovers - chicken bones, ribs, the white comb-like tail of the pomfret, which is simple and symmetrical - we deposit upon her beggar's plate for her to chew and gnash and then blissfully spit out. ... Once started, he [his father] floods his plate with daal, till it has made a yellow lake with white hillocks of rice upon its banks. (214)

The narrator had other implication about above lines and his love for food and particularly his local food. For Bengalis, food is one of the most essential aspects of their day to day lives. Ladies spend a lot of time in the kitchen cooking delicious feast for the family. Most of the cooking is done using mustard oil. Pitha or peetha is a part of life and culture of the Bengali and Bangladeshi people. It demands time and labour for pre preparation of pitha making but pithas still continue to attract many people whether rural or urban. He writes:

Each time these lines bring to me the idea of a seascape, and sometimes other conflicting pictures, like the memory of daal and sweet-potatoes being ground and mashed all day in the kitchen, then patted, shaped, and fried into pithhas, and left overnight in syrup; my mother choosing the brownest one for me, and the little less perfected one for my father. (277-278)

Chaudhuri's third novel, *Freedom Song* is a song of Bengali culture. It ironically explores the story of two closely related middle class families in Calcutta. Music of Bengal forms an important part of Bengali cultural heritage. In fact, the music of West Bengal compliments and adorns its culture. There is a lot of variety within Bengali music, from Bangla classic to Bangla folk and even rock. In one of the conversations, Khuku once again recollects her childhood and her dying desire to learn music. Khuku was a singer and used to practise her music when she was young. She used to secretly practise harmonium that was presented to her brother by her elder sister. Bhola was too impatient to sit and play it; and it was Khuku, not Bhola, who learnt how to play. Her familiar song: "Lost Heart/ On a verdant road/ I gather strewn flowers/ By myself" (394). She began singing again after her marriage. She would sit before her harmonium and practise music. She used to sing a Hindu devotional Kirtan which Nazrul Islam had composed in a moment of ecstasy and she had learnt this song when she was just seven years old: "How could I be happy at home?/ For if my Shyam has become a yogi/ Then as a yogini with him I'll roam" (317). Her husband loved this song: "he sat listening to it vey solemnly, as if he had a hot potato in his mouth." Then: "But if it's earth he wants/ Then I'll be the earth at his bright feet/ For the love of my beloved" (317). Always the song returned to its first three lines, where lay its home and heart, its original question and its answer: "Aami ki shukhe lo grihe rabo?/ Aamar Shyam Jodi ogo jogi holo shokhi/ Aamio jogini hobo" (317).

The childhood of Khuku was difficult one as her father had died and her mother all alone had to fulfil the responsibilities of the family. Khuku's mother had sold almost everything of the house even the gramophone. Whenever Khuku or anyone in the family needed the gramophone they would get it from Shib's house as they were very rich landowners. Khuku loved singing but Bhola was the one who used to sing. He even got a harmonium from his elder sister. Bhola was impatient so was unable to sit and play for long but Khuku was a dedicated student and she learnt how to play the harmonium. Her brothers used to tease her and call her 'Bijonbala Ghosh Dastidar!' after the famous classical singer.

The relation between Mohit and Bhaskar's mother was very friendly. Whenever Mohit used to come to her house she would continuously ask him tea, water, food, etc. He would reply in anger that he wanted nothing. She was his great-aunt and loved him like her own children. He would be offered food and cup of tea but would refuse as it was a sign of adulthood to drink tea:

'Will you have luchi, Mohit?' she asked.

'No,' he said.

'Omelette?'

'No.'

'Pithha?' Have a pithha. I made them yesterday.'

'No,' said Mohit firmly, as if he were used to warding off such requests. 'In fact, I just had something before I came here.' His hair was still gleaming from the bath he had had half an hour ago.

'What did you have?'

'Oof! What a question,' said Mohit, looking ashamed. 'Milk and toast and roshogolla,' he admitted with a mixture of bravado and embarrassment. (287)

Chaudhuri's fourth novel *A New World* talks about relationships, marriage, cultures and values. Bonny accompanied his father to Calcutta to his grandparents' house. Jayojit's mother, Ruby was a very loving and caring person. She got involved with Bonny and was not worried about others. She was concerned about his eating, bathing, sleeping, playing, etc. She had great affection for her only grandson, and her elder son's only child. Bonny loved her grandmother and used to write letters to her. She knew the fact that the joy was momentarily and not permanent as his grandson lived with his mother. Bonny's parents had got divorced and he lived with his mother. She shared a fine relation with his son. She was concerned about his meals as she thought he did not get healthy food in America and would say:

"Joy, you will not get luchis over there." His mother had fixed ideas about what his life 'over there' was like. She had never been abroad; it was an imaginary place for her, a territory that intersected with her life without ever actually touching it, and which had, for her, its own recognizable characteristics. (40)

Jayojit was a caring father and was playing the role of a single parent very efficiently. He knew everything about Bonny and knew about Bonny's needs. They had lunch and Bonny's grandmother was forcing him to have more but Jayojit stopped his mother and asked her to serve Bonny daal instead of fish. Jayojit said, "Just thank your stars he's eating something!" (15). Jayojit and Bonny spent time with each other in Calcutta which they could not in America as they lived apart. Bonny told his father about his breakfast and even told him that sugarcane gur tastes like maple syrup. Jayojit explained him that gur is not maple syrup and enquired of him if he had brushed his teeth. Then Jayojit's mother interrupted and told him that Bonny had done everything before breakfast. Jayojit and his mother would communicate with each other in Bengali and Bonny would continuously stare at his grandmother in order to understand what she was saying:

Bonny, who had been staring mutely at his grandmother, as if he were lip-reading, nodded. He could follow the language - he had so often heard his mother and father talk in it in his first five years - but he could not speak it. It was both a disadvantage and an odd privilege that set him apart, and caused others around him here to make that small extra effort to communicate themselves to him. (23)

Jayojit had to go back to America and before leaving he gave some money to Maya, maid servant and presented a sari to her mother. His parents loved him and got box of Sandesh (sweets) for him as Jayojit was a lover of sandesh. Then packing was done for the departure and everything was packed including Bonny's books and toys. Time arrived for the departure and Jayojit's parents accompanied them till the gates of the airport and Jayojit and Bonny bid goodbye and left.

Chaudhuri's fifth novel, *The Immortals* talks about two families joined by their common, day-to-day pursuit of music. It talks about the relationship of Nirmalya and his Guruji and the consequences of that relationship on their lives and lives of their families. Nirmalya Sengupta is the teenage son of a father who works in a corporate sector. Nirmalya enjoys all the facilities that a rich family's son can. Unlike many teenagers, he is trying to find his own way with the hypercritical zeal that only the privileged can give off. The novel is a sustained consideration on the relationship of art and commerce. Classical music is the framework through which Chaudhuri discusses the change in culture in India. Classical music was once revered but now how pop music is encroaching on its status. The novel is about the relationship between music and its contexts: human lives, the necessity of compromise, relationships defined by power, helplessness and dependence.

The central theme of the novel is music through which everyone in the novel is connected. The novel starts with the notes of Bhimpalasi (a raag) which were coming from a corner of the room and Bhimpalasi is a Hindustani classical raga. The author here has focused on Panditji, his guru and also protagonist's guru who died but he remembered that he used to sing beautifully when he was alive. He was a sensitive man and was trained in Hindustani classical music. He was not a known personality but was well versed in his music. People outside his family remembered him less if asked, "Where did you learn that beautiful bandish? they might say in a tone of remembrance, 'Oh I had learnt that from Pandit Ram Lal,' for people used to drift in and out of Panditji's life, and some became students for brief spells of time" (3). His whole family had been trained in singing. Ram Lal believed in the worship of the classical music which was life to him. His son, Shyamji was different from him as he learnt music to earn money. He believed in commercialisation of music and took it as a job. Even Nirmalya wanted him to have a name in Indian classical music but he focused more on Hindi film songs as it was an easy way of teaching and earning money. Nirmalya knew that Shyamji was the best teacher but he felt that an artist must devote himself to art rather than success. He put it to Shyamji plainly:

Shyamji, why don't you sing classical more often? Why don't you sing fewer ghazals and sing more at classical concerts? Shyamji was always unimpeachably polite. He now turned to study the Managing Director's son's face with curiosity, as if he were reminded again of the boy's naivety.

'Baba,' he said, let me establish myself so that I don't have to think of money anymore. Then I can devote myself completely to art. You can't sing classical on an empty stomach. (191-192)

Nirmalya had heard these kinds of arguments before that one must first satisfy his physical needs like shelter, clothing than the psychological needs like culture but he did not believe in it. Music was a connecting link between Shyamji, Nirmalya and Mrs Sengupta. Shyamji used to teach Mallika Sengupta meanwhile Nirmalya developed interested in music. He started spending time with his mother and would go to attend concerts with her. Even Mrs Sengupta loved spending time with her son and it was

Indian classical music that brought them closer. They would discuss about musical concerts and about the singers and their singing. Even Nirmalya wanted to learn classical music from Shyamji. Shyamji continued Mallika's practise of bhajans and Nirmalya also started practising. The bhajans were mostly of Krishna and Meera: "Log kahe Meera bhai bawri"; "People say Meera's mad" (117).

Bengali Food is an important aspect for Bengalis. Apurva Sengupta and his family loved Bengali food. The food prepared at Apurva's house was also liked by his friends. Parties were part of Senguptas life and these were important things. Philip Dyer, Apurva's colleague was fond of food, Dyer would ask for the menu. He liked eating Mrs Sengupta's Bengali fish preparations. Mr Sengupta would keep special eye on the menu and would ask his wife if she was making fish. Laxmi Ratan Shukla, a bureaucrat, the head of HMV's Light Music wing had come to hear Mrs Sengupta singing but he did not like her pronunciation. He liked Bengali food and was offered luchis and a cup of tea. He was not used to this kind of food but he liked it and ate the whole plate. On being offered more luchis he denied as he was full. He softly explained her that she could sing bhajans but Hindi is difficult for her. Being a Bengali she had in her that accent which was troubling her while singing. On his recommendation Motilalji was sent off and Jairam started training Mallika Sengupta.

The paper illuminates the various themes of true human experiences. The theme expresses the author's opinion or raises a question about human nature of the meaning of human experience. Chaudhuri discusses the various themes like, music, food, etc. very realistically. He also gives clearance by giving the underling meaning of the novels. By doing so he has presented a true picture of middle class families of India especially Calcutta.

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