**International Journal of Advanced Research and Development**
**ISSN: 2455-4030, Impact Factor: RJIF 5.24**
**www.advancedjournal.com**
**Volume 1; Issue 9; Sep 2016; Page No. 58-62**

# Defamiliarization in Amit Choudhury's *A strange and sublime address*

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**Abstract**
This paper discusses Defamiliarization in Amit Chaudhuri's debut novel *A Strange and Sublime Address*. Defamiliarization is a literary technique that compels readers to see the commonplace, known things in a weird and unfamiliar way. It retards the very act of looking at everyday words or objects, in order to force the listener or reader to reexamine it. Amit Chaudhuri makes his novel (*A Strange and Sublime Address)* so praiseworthy and attention-grabbing by using the technique of defamiliarization, even when there are no gripping stories to tell, no momentous events to describe and no emotional outbursts. He has a deep attachment to the culture of his country, especially that of Bengal.

**Keywords:** Digital Divide, Access, Internet, ICTs, Infrastructure

## Introduction

Amit Chaudhuri's debut novel *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991) gave him a huge worldwide success by winning three Awards, namely Betty Trask Prize (1991) and Commonwealth Writers Prize (Eurasia Region, Best First Book, 1992). It is his first book of fiction, in which nine stories follow the title piece, and is a symbolist depiction of a child's trip to his maternal family's home in Calcutta. "Heat waves, thunderstorms, mealtimes, prayer-sessions, shopping expeditions and family visits create a shifting background to the shaping of the lives of the people" (India Net zone). Time and again Chaudhuri has talked about "the renewal, even re-discovery of our perception of things, of recovering their redemptive quality, of investing them with magic, not the magic of magic realism, but the magic of childhood, magic of poetry" (Shukla and Shukla 16), and hence uses defamiliarization in his novels.

*A Strange and Sublime Address* is an attempt to examine the use of defamiliarization's peculiar language that slows the narrative as the vehicle that brings into play a slower, older way of life, a way of life that favours present experience. Defamiliarization retards the very act of looking at everyday words or objects, in order to force the listener or reader to reexamine it. In short, defamiliarization renders the familiar unfamiliar, the known unknown, and the obvious special. If a thing is expressed in simple, predictable language, then one tends to jump from its description to what the thing actually is, and this jump is pretty immediate, preventing the reader to think about it or muse over it. On the other hand, the intricate and loud descriptions of defamiliarization often create a time gap between the reading of the description and identifying that which it describes. This theme is marked not only in the plot of the novel, but also in the very structure of the language that the author uses. The novel appears to be a collection with no plot, a story-less city— but cities do have stories. Sandeep, the protagonist of his first novel feels that the "'real' story, with its beginning, middle, and conclusion, would never be told, because it did not exist" (*ASASA* 68), and however, this is not precisely true; or, we can say that it is fairly true, but not actually helpful as an insight, particularly if we apply it to the text we are reading. It has a first word, a middle word, a last word, as it also has a first, last, and middle sentence, page and chapter. Stories are told, and stories lead into other stories.

The story is narrated in third person point of view. It describes Sandeep, the protagonist's childhood recollections. It is about "a boy's discovery of Calcutta ... a novel about spaces, streets, sounds, the auditory background with which an Indian lives" ("On Belonging..." 44-45). It is a novel which gives this collection its title and the nine stories which accompany it. Notably, it is the collection of the memories of Calcutta city which make Sandeep, the hero of the novel, to believe this city to be 'strange and sublime'. Sandeep, who comes to Calcutta to spend his holidays with his cousins, maternal uncle and aunt, is the only child of a successful Bombay businessman. His journey from Bombay to Calcutta, with his mother is metaphorically a journey from the silence of his parents' modern flat in Bombay to the traditional household of his Calcutta uncle. He has deep intimacy with this city as he is born in this city. Furthermore, he is inquisitive about everything he comes across. Enjoying ecstatically in the company of his cousins Abhi and Babla, he takes interest in every new thing. Thus, the author thinks of everything indifferently with the help of third person narration. The novel gives a fairly amusing account of minute details that take place in everyday life.

Although the plot of this novel like many of Chaudhuri's other novels and stories, does not have any real meaning, its depiction of some of the images of the perils of urbanity in the present-day city of Calcutta is really a dramatic one. In the novel, the protagonist is a twelve year old and is endowed with childlike perception. The humour and irony turn out to be an inseparable part he desires to record in his impressions. All the observations like the street in Calcutta, two boys playing at the rusting gate of their house, the reaction of surprise on their faces when they spot a taxi in front gate and the enthusiastic welcome given to Sandeep and his mother after coming to house of his Chhotomama and Mamima are depicted in an interesting manner.

At the very outset, the boy observes the "small houses, unlovely and unremarkable" (*ASASA* 3) in his uncle's street. Yet, it is not an ordinary observation; the boy's perspective transforms this otherwise unremarkable place. Everything at his uncle's house is so different from his silent and flawless apartment in Bombay. The pale walls, corners having spider webs, soothing bed sheets on the old beds, the portraits of grandfathers and grandmothers, the fans that move erratically from side to side, a large, shabby table in the dining room, an old radio - Sandeep finds them all very strange and amusing. Again, he observes strange things during bathing. For example, when he takes his first bath, he observes: "There was a tap in the middle; at the top, a round eye sprinkled with orifices protruded from a pipe that was bent downward like the neck of a tired giraffe; this was the shower" (8). Again, "When the boys had had their bath, they trooped out like naked ruffians on an island, spattering the floor with their wet footprints" (9). Then, after the bath, when Mamima oils his body, "a sharp aura of mustard oil flowered, giving Sandeep's nostrils a faraway sentient pleasure—it wasn't a sweet smell, but there was a harsh unexpectedness about it he liked. It reminded him of sunlight" (7-8). The author further makes the reading exciting when he draws a comparison between the soaking of tamarind and babies. Thus, Chaudhuri forces the readers to take a pause at every small and 'not-so-significant' detail and activity and as a result renders them important by infusing life into them.

Amit Chaudhuri's tale abounds in sounds and sound effects, which the author describes using a great deal of poetic devices like personification, similies, metaphors, etc. For example, not only the pots and pans in the kitchen hold a "no less urgent, dialogue" (6), but also, mynahs and shaliks sing in a "fragmentary chorus" (8). When washed, clothes make a "loud watery 'pluff' on the floor" (9) and while being cooked, chillies snap with "a sound terse as a satirical retort" (10). In the novel, the radio emits "voices, loud and elemental as thunder" (11). It begins to "babble…like the local idiot" (11), and plays feature heroines whose voices "quiver like a note on the violin" (15) and murderers whose killings are "accompanied by drums and cymbals" (15-16), and the football commentary is a "nervous, breathless sound" (12). The pages of newspaper "crackle festively" (11), and Chhotomama's battered Ambassador car makes a "grating, earthly noise, like a drunk man cracking an obscene joke in a guttural dialect and laughing at it at the same time" (18). Other sounds in the novel are: from the local radio that babbles "like a local idiot" (11) to thunder that, after a "moment's heavy silence" speaks "guruguruguru" (84). However, the sounds described in this manner create not only a single sensation or thought in the mind of the reader, but also evoke "a world of pure elemental feeling" (49). Not only the sounds, but also the visual scenes are made more evocative by the creative and expressive genius of the author.

Chaudhuri describes his intense observations of the very small movements of the pigeons. The boys are amused at "their [pigeon's] aesthetic contribution to life" as they artistically arrange, in an "intricate manner ... their excrement on the parapet, so that it came to resemble a mosaic or an abstract graphic on stone" (50). Even the work of a maid servant Saraswati is explained in detail and her movements while working in the household become a source of great curiosity and amusement for the children in the house. The bathroom resounds with a weird and wonderful rhythm when Saraswati bangs the clothes. They secretly observe her activities from behind the door. He also describes minutely the make-up of his mother and aunt while they are going for shopping. Not only these quotidian minutiae, but the novel is also alive with various kinds of food and food preparations; in fact he savors the food imagery and imbues it with poetry and symbolism.

The writer has a keen vision and even a small and insignificant thing or activity is unable to escape his sight. He can not only taste and smell voraciously, but also see rapaciously.

...nothing which can kindle the imagination of the writer can escape him. He can notice and describe how a newspaper is rolled and thrown into the balcony... how Chhotomama sings while taking bath, how he starts his old car, how patients lie in the hospital, .... [and so on]. (Shukla and Shukla 10)

Similarly, the neighboring houses and the people residing in them are described with great curiosity.

Just as the literary canvas of Jane Austen was little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which she worked (Mosel), the literary canvas of Amit Chaudhuri is also very small but highly fertile. "If Jane Austen can write about three or four families in a village and be a great writer why not Amit Chaudhuri write about Calcutta or certain part of it and still be an eminent writer"(Shukla and Shukla 4). Calcutta comes about to be a more cherished location for him than any other city. *A Strange and Sublime Address* has rightly been called as "a boy's discovery of Calcutta...." ("On Belonging..." 44). Chaudhuri can feel the city, not to talk of "touch, hear, see and even taste city" (Shukla and Shukla 9). He so connects with the city that he can cognize every small sound that appears in the city - the sound of birds, animals, utensils and human beings, every small movement that takes place - the movement of the clock, the fan, the lizard, people, birds, etc., he can, like a connoisseur, taste and smell every tiny thing, that too at all times of day, very deftly and artistically, and can easily make one thing from the other. The novel also focuses on some of the leading, some vital aspects of the present day city of Calcutta. The novel depicts evocative images of Calcutta as a city of dust, as a city of unbearable traffic jams, as a city of recurrent power cuts and the others.

For Chaudhuri a place is not merely a place, it is much larger than that, one that can encompass all the different and similar places of the world. Thus, when Chhotomama comes out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his loins and thighs, he looks "like the chieftain of some undiscovered, happy African tribe" (*ASASA* 64). Chaudhuri limits himself to some local spaces in Calcutta, and weaves the stuff of his novel on the distinctiveness and uniqueness of their local culture. He really creates micro worlds.

Amit Chaudhuri mentions the title and its significance only at one place in the novel. Once Sandeep, while going through the books of his cousin Abhi, observes Abhi's address written in a strange manner. The address is as:

Abhijit Das
17 Vivekananda Road,
Calcutta (South)
West Bengal,
India,
Asia
Earth,

The Solar System,
The Universe

Sandeep exclaims, "It is a strange and sublime address" (101). The address written in this manner leaves a great impression on his mind. Abhi, a child, looks at himself as an entity of the whole Universe. He neither looks at himself only in relation to his home - 17 Vivekananda Road, nor only to Calcutta (South), nor West Bengal, and India, but visualizes himself in relation to the whole Universe. Despite being just a child, he crosses the narrow boundaries of regionalism and even nationalism, and sees himself as a part of the Universe. This is indeed a very lofty imagination, and the address is actually 'strange and sublime'. Thus, the title unquestionably lays down the tone of the novel 'strange and sublime'. We can say that Sandeep's cousin connects his home with the world and the whole universe. This piece is vital as it can be taken as a moving away from nationalist approach of self-identification and embracing the idea that we a part of the global community, while at the same time preserving our individual characteristics. Moreover, the way the title is mentioned on the cover of the book, indicates that it is printed in this manner to induce defamiliarization. Also, the title is printed as - '*a* strange *and* sublime address' - with all letters in the lower case. Usually, the titles are written with all content words beginning with upper case letter, besides the first letter also in the upper case. As such, under the normal practice, the title should have been - 'A Strange and Sublime Address, but it is the other way round. Not only this, the 'a' and the 'and' in the title are italicized. This is again an unusual thing that highlights Chaudhuri's pre-occupation with defamiliarization as shown in the presentation of the title of this book.

Chaudhuri paints his world not "by looking at life through tinted glasses but by removing the layer of the dust of desensitized, habitual perception which usually lies over it" (Shukla 51). Instead of moving simply from one page to the other, taking a leap from one plot point to the next in the narrative, we are caught in the instant of perception, during which we struggle with a complex or strange image. The cosmopolitan or universal stance of the author gets revealed time and again when he juxtaposes the images of the cosmos with the local, down-to-earth ones. Sandeep's mother brings a sari from Bombay for his aunt which "broke into a galaxy of hand-woven stars, a cosmos of streaking comets and symbolic blue horizons" (*ASASA* 5). In this example, as in some others, the images of stars and the moon are intertwined with local images. Again, at one point, when the boys:

...run up to the terrace to spy on the world, they saw the moon and the great constellations in the sky. It was a clear sky, and the clouds seemed to have descended upon Calcutta; rivers of smoke and mist travelled through the streets, blurring the lights in the houses (124).

Here, the mention of the stars could be taken as suggestive of the global, to be more precise, the cosmological, while the initial point of reference is always Calcutta. Again, when Chhotomama had suffered from a heart attack, "the children floated like satellites in the distance, afraid to collide with the painful orbit of adult lives, and yet always being pulled toward it against their will" (129). The common and limited is present in the novels in its unlimited and multi-faceted dimensions, as references to sights, smells, sounds, flavours and collective customs make clear. Nonetheless, the author is mainly concerned with the trivial, ordinary and forgotten elements of daily existence.

The intense descriptions in his novels should not be taken "metonymically for the sights and smells of India. They are, rather, an attempt at poetic dwelling in the world and of its imaginative reconfiguration" (Austin 3). For example, when Sandeep's aunt, Mamina, goes to the prayer-room carrying an offering to the gods in the form of immaculately arranged slices of cucumber, oranges, and sweet white batashas, thus creating the colours of the Indian flag. Sandeep views this ritual as a secular viewer, and enjoys the sight of "a grown-up at play. Prayer-time was when adults became children again" (*ASASA* 44). Mamima feels safe and sound in the world of mythology and the external symbols of Indianness. However, the colours of our national flag, in this illustration, are real physical objects, and not mere symbols, because they smell, taste and, tellingly, are not permanent. And in considering his aunt's rituals as child's play, Sandeep's insight goes beyond the religious and the national boundaries and remains open to new interpretations and ways of inhabiting the world. This is how Chaudhuri's defamiliarization acts.

Chaudhuri has thus delineated several characters in the novel but has not drawn their internal landscape, that is, their interiority. Chhotomama's persistently keeps Mamima on her heels by giving instructions one after the other and thus makes the readers too run here and there with Mamima. Sandeep also gives the complete 'character-sketch' of his uncle's old-fashioned grey colored Ambassador car that often caused problems. The following passage, in which Chhotomama is described as having a heart attack, provides a testimony to Chaudhuri's artistic acumen: He was "trying to tear his shirt off. The buttons were coming apart, exploding like peas and falling to the floor" (128). It's not that one cannot understand the passage, yet it is strange. Thanks to Chaudhuri's defamiliarization, his buttons are not just coming apart as buttons usually do; they are also 'exploding like peas'. It is indeed the distinctiveness of this description - its departure from the usual - that forces us to stop, re-read and re-evaluate. Thus, Chaudhuri extends the instant of perceiving the image, rather than simply identifying the trope to which it belongs and moving on, hence the narrative time gets slowed down. Consequently, the forward narrative momentum is interrupted as our focus shifts to the experience of the present image; this is the very purpose of defamiliarization.

*A Strange and Sublime Address* is a story preoccupied with time. Time is what hinders everything from being given at once. It retards, or rather it is retardation. Although there is no interesting story being told in the novel, the novel creates curiosity in the minds of the readers and holds it till the last page of the novel. Nowhere does the reader feel to stop in the middle. It is a slow novel and talks about the minutia of home life - those things which most novels so consciously or unconsciously pass over. Chaudhuri discards the usual, forward moving narrative and in its place, puts present experience under a microscope, lingering over it.

Chaudhuri seems quite interested in using 'pseudo-epiphanies' to bring about defamiliarization. Epiphanies are recalled in commonplace, direct surroundings which, through the use of a term, an image or an idea, disclose inner life and are endowed with new meanings. The author also alludes to

Joyce's use of epiphany in the hanging of clothes on a clothes-line on the terrace, or fleeting glances exchanged between lovers from one terrace to the other: "Such shy, piercing glances exchanged in the heat of the afternoon! … What rhythm the moment possessed!" (113). Again, Finding out the meaning of the name Alpana, Sandeep is instantly reminded of a girl he had once known. "Now he knew what the name meant. He did not know what to do with the unexpected knowledge. But he felt a slight, almost negligible, twinge of pleasure, as a meaning took birth in his mind, and died the next instant" (151). The transient nature of an epiphanic instant is brilliantly shown on the last pages of the novel. Chhotomama is admitted in a hospital. The garden therein becomes a source of joy for the children as they hear kokils singing. Enthralled by the sound of the birds, the boys try to trace the birds in the trees, but the kokil is invisible: "it did not seem to exist at all, except the cry, which rose questioningly and affirmatively again and again from the leaves" (155). Much later, when the boys have already forgotten about it, Abhi happens to see the kokil in the tree "eating the orange flower" (156). Thus, the novel describes many such instants having epiphanic potentiality; though the promise of epiphany is never fulfilled.

Chaudhuri writes evocatively taking us right into the mind and emotional world of this minor character. Practically, all the characters in the novel are intensely drawn. Each one of them is a complete human being having realistic mannerism, costume, psychology, history, that is both external and internal attributes. Besides the main characters, even the minor characters are delineated with utter sincerity and minute details. The physical appearance along with the mannerisms of Chhaya, the daily help, "her serious and cultured face with a serious smile" (14); the grumpy old grandaunt Chhordimoni with her "expletives, intense names as untranslatable as poetry" (104); Abhi's English tutor and his careful folding up of his red muffler (otherwise wrapped all over his face, his glasses excepted) and "his natural eloquence in Bengali after his brave guerrilla invasion into the rocky terrain of English" and his "passionate, noisy sips" (121) at tea, etc. all are keenly described, owing to Chaudhuri's acute observation and understanding of such quotidian minutiae of life with his weapon called defamiliarization.

In addition to other strategies, he also uses irony as a defamiliarizating tool. The author turns the cosmopolitan Calcutta into the Calcutta of minutiae of quotidian existence. The creative imagination of the writer being very fertile, it puts forth the most unexpected comparisons for ordinary happenings of life. His imagination turns Chhotomama with a towel wrapped around his waist into "the chieftain of some undiscovered, happy African tribe" (64). Australia, the continent, is nothing but a huge raft floating on the ocean. With the help of literature, religion, mythology and so on, the writer and creates a new world and puts it side by side with the world of Calcutta. For him, Saraswati's wet foot prints are "as rich with possibility as the first footprint Crusoe found on his island" (88).

Again, Chaudhuri uses far-fetched similes and metaphors to the extent that they remind the readers of the metaphysical conceits of metaphysical poets. He expresses the slow movement of the patients, "taking one step at a time, like a giant treading carefully between one continent and another, anxious not to trample on an invisible city or a civilization" (148). Here, the carefully structured and slow movement of patients has been compared with the movement of a giant who carefully and slowly steps over continents not to harm the inhabitants. Such implausible and fantastic comparison is so contrived to bring about defamiliarization that is Chaudhuri's forte. The novel is overloaded with such improbable similes and comparisons. From the "starched saris, which swelled unmanageably around them [women] like plumage (151); the ends of the saris "skimming gently behind them like wings...reminded one of grave birds dancing in a clearing" (151) to the legs of Chhaya which like "two romantic, indefinite paths on a mountainside, were lost in her sari's vast landscape" (28), and from the fan that "rotated, moved unreliably from side to side, like a great bird trying to fly (4) to the clean tea-cups, "clean like the soul of a wronged criminal" (29) - all remind us of Donne's description of a river bank as "a pregnant bank swell'd up" like "a pillow on a bank"("The Ecstasy") and his mention of "merchant's ships" having been drowned by "my [his] sighs" ("The Canonization") and so on. Just as Donne could feel his thoughts immediately, Chaudhuri could also feel connected with the mundane things and activities of life, and makes us go through a similar kind of experience.

Although the writer has no good real story to offer in the novel, it is definitely ingrained in the diverse aspects of the habitual daily life. Despite the fact that the novel lacks true mystery, suspense, bravery and miracle in the novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address* is yet very enthralling and gripping. There is little action in the novel unless we consider activities like bathing, dining, gossiping and singing as 'action'. There is nothing unusual either about the place or the people Amit Chaudhuri writes about, yet everything about them is unusually expressed, or this is Chaudhuri's art. Amit Chaudhuri writes sentence by sentence, scene by scene, like a precise and sensual writer having a great gift for storytelling, even when there is no gripping story to tell, making commonplace look extraordinary. Using defamiliarization, he moves gradually between the external world and the interior, giving us glimpses of daily life, the minutiae of quotidian, in a way that makes them look at once magnificent, radiant, vibrant, and revealing ones, in his novel. Although "Chaudhuri's languorous, elliptical, beautiful prose is impressively impossible to put in any category at all" (Rushdie 259), it is the most potent example of defamiliarization. This delineation of the usual, quotidian magic of ordinariness surely is astonishing and extraordinary; the effect is mesmerizing. Thus, in *A Strange and Sublime Address* Amit Chadhuri invokes a world that is concerned not with plot and forward drive, but rather with the plain, 'not-so-significant' and usually forgotten or unnoticed moments of present experience. And by using defamiliarization that slows our encounter with the narrative, he appears to propose that something is missing from our present-day, well thought-out system of time. Thus, Chaudhuri has tried to possess something that is so uncommon, a measure of "calm and inviolable existence" (*ASASA* 135). Chaudhuri's debut novel is indeed strange and sublime.

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