
Rethinking N. C. Chowdhury's *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*: History or a Biography?

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Abstract

The literary creation of Nirad C. Chaudhuri often renders him to be an anti-Indian, pro-British individual and a writer as atavistic as India during the nineteenth century when literary London considers Chaudhuri from the colonies as exotic outsiders and solitary figures. The writer is considered to be able to communicate the intricacies of his native culture, embody newness, and possess the entelechy to describe the colonies and the British from an exotic perspective. For this purpose, this article investigates Nirad C. Chaudhuri's attempt to write history through an autobiographical mode in *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*. It aims to establish his views and status detached from his countrymen. It would like to express his views regarding the West and the East. In fact, this article would like to explain historical sense, conflicts between the British and the Indians, cultural bias, modern civilization, dislocation and alienation, and Renaissance awakening with regard to Chaudhuri's non-fiction.

Keywords: Alienation, Chaudhuri, Cultural bias, Bengali Renaissance, and Modern civilization.

Introduction

Nirad C. Chaudhuri, in full Nirad Chandra Chaudhuri (November 23, 1897-August 1, 1999) is a Bengali writer and scholar who is opposed to the withdrawal of British colonial rule from the Indian subcontinent and the subsequent rejection of Western culture in independent India. He is an erudite and complex individual who seems to have been born in the wrong place and at the wrong age.

Chaudhuri is the son of a rural lawyer and an uneducated mother. In his young age, he studies William Shakespeare and Sanskrit classics. He admires Western culture as much as he does his own. His debut on the Indian literary scene is dealt with controversy. He tries to show his first non-fiction, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951), to the memory of the British Empire. He assumes that everything is good and that lives within human beings are made, shaped, and quickened by the similar British rule. His sentiment is far from popular in a newly independent nation trying to grapple with its insecurities and where anticolonial sentiment is rampant. Chaudhuri's non-fiction is excoriated, and he is hounded from his job as a broadcaster and a political commentator for All India Radio.

In 1970, Chaudhuri decides to leave India for England where he settles in the

university town of Oxford. He envisions that move as a homecoming of sorts. But he finds a different place than England he chooses. He proves to be as much an oddity in England as he had been in India. The English does not understand his unique combination of proud Indianness coupled with the nostalgic glory of the British Empire. Chaudhuri did not accept the metamorphosis that the English undergoes in the years since the decline of the empire. He is appalled by their total lack of commitment to the values.

The fiction writer receives an honorary doctorate from the University of Oxford in 1990 and an honorary CBE (Commander of the Order of the British Empire) from Queen Elizabeth II in 1992). The essays in his last book, *Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse* (1997)—are published shortly before his one hundredth birthday—return to the subject of the decline of England and comment on what he observes as the degeneration of the leadership in India.

Chaudhuri is the greatest writer of nonfiction among Indians in the twentieth century. He claims to have studied Shakespeare before he learns to walk. With the publication of his magnum opus, *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, he becomes well-known writer for his unabashed admiration for Western, especially British, culture and his acerbic, contrarian views of Indian civilization. The writer is considered to be able to communicate the intricacies of his native culture, embody newness, and possess the entelechy to describe the colonies and the British from an exotic perspective.

This article aims to demonstrate how Indian Culture has a variety of religions like Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Christianity, etc. while in Western Culture the people mostly belong to Christianity. However, different writers from the colonies interrogate the preconceived dominant cultural assumption in their manner to facilitate the process of an aesthetic translation. Chaudhuri publishes his memoir, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* with Macmillan. Though critics evaluate him for several justifiable disturbing parameter in his work, there are certain tendencies like his evoking a sense of place, his humour, his independence of judgement in the teeth of opposition and his phenomenal ability to keep on working.

The essay represents an impassioned detailed description of “the conditions in which an Indian grew to manhood in the early decades of the twentieth century” (*The Autobiography* Preface 35). In comparison, Western societies are more individualist in nature, with weaker ties to families and social groups. Whereas Indians tend to put the needs of the group first, British people are less likely to sacrifice their personal needs. Here it can be said that in the book, Chaudhuri presents social environments which impact his life. Kishorganj, his birthplace and where he lives till, he reaches twelve, Bangram, his ancestral village, Kalikutch, his mother's village and England of his imagination. There are references to Calcutta, the Indian Renaissance, the beginning of the nationalist movement, and the author's experience of the colonial English arrogance in India

which are presented in contrast to the constructions of civilization as “the greatest civilization on earth” (“Interview” 7).

Chaudhuri's opinion regarding history, politics and culture that binds a civilisation based on thematic constructions which pervade his work. In this context, it can be said here that Chaudhuri did not visit Britain till he reaches fifty-seven when he comes with the sponsorship of the BBC. He moves to Britain at the age of seventy-three and settles in Oxford for the rest of his life with his wife. However, The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian is a historical document of his life. To write an autobiography is a literary endeavour whose national significance bears witness to contemporary history. Chaudhuri's personal history and experiences have been documented in his book based on Indian culture and national history as they are a witness to an account of the decline of Bengal, which is matched by the failure of British imperialists to bequeath a lasting cultural legacy in India (Ranasinha 71). It enables him to assert his autonomy and disinterest from his milieu, as autobiography is associated with the idea of self-identity and separate selfhood (McClintock 313).

Historical Sense

The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian depicts the story of the early period of Chaudhuri's life and documents the condition. Though his presentation and interpretation of the history of India establish his critical insight in association with his subjective approach to the problems of Indian history, society, politics and

culture. But his self-Westernization remains static and lifeless throughout his profession. It is due to his self-Westernization that his sharp and merciless views of post-independent India in The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian are received with favour in Britain. The non-fiction is an Indian's self-portrait, mirroring the tortured assertiveness of a scholarly spirit that embraces in individual life an extreme dislocation. The Autobiography embodies the perspectives of the author along with the truth of the text, facilitating access to a visible self “an intention to honour the signature” (Lejeune 202).

Conflicts between the British and the Indians

The source of conflict between the British and Indian people was that Great Britain wanted to colonize all of India and turn all of India's population into the colonial subjects who would have to pay heavy taxes and work in the extremely poor conditions. After oppressing India for two hundred-years, draining its wealth and filling their own coffers, the United Kingdom being ripped the Indian subcontinent into pieces just before they finally left. The partition of 1947 that came along with India's independence left nearly one million dead and thirteen million displaced.

The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian presents a coherent and imaginative portrayal of India's history. Chaudhuri thinks that it is the unity in diversity of India that urges the British to consider the Indians with an attitude of esteem and honour.

Indian civilization is a history of past achievements along with a community despite endowing with multi-racial and multi-lingual culture. Chaudhuri aims to write down history through the autobiographical elements as an avenue to get history inaugurated. Since his early college days, he gets fascinated with history (Iyengar 591). His aim is neither to depict an autobiographical document nor to reveal on the surface the various facets of his self. The essay is his verdict on the British Raj and a virulent attack on the Indians practising poor mimicry of the notion of Western materialistic culture. A clash between the cultures of the natives and the alien culture takes place at mundane levels of existence. Chaudhuri brings in the reference to the incident of 1916 by stating how the boys of the matriculation class bow down to the locomotives as if they were gods. His interaction with the West is concerned with the spiritual realm of existence. His westernization is of the older pattern and is concerned with the mind than the material things (Swain 80). Despite the impact of the West upon his ideology, the occidental influences upon his psyche are expressed through his consciousness, society, and culture. Chaudhuri thinks that the British Empire confers subjecthood on Indians at the same time it withholds citizenship (Fanon 38), and the cultural contact is experienced by him. Thus, he presents the spirit of England as a place agitating the birth of space out of mythic geography. He assumes that England is conjured up as one of the shaping forces of his life (Sharma

1066). The places that hold an influence on his boyhood, family antecedents, cultural milieu, nationalist Bengal, the cold war between the ruling and the subject races, city and University of Calcutta, the coming of Gandhi and the eruption of the new politics of the twenties which receive as much attention as the quiddities of his temperament or vicissitudes of childhood, boyhood and youth.

Cultural Bias

A cultural bias is a tendency to interpret a word or action according to culturally derived meaning assigned to it. Cultural bias derives from cultural variation, discussed later in this chapter. For example, some cultures view smiles as a deeply personal sign of happiness that is only shared with intimates.

Chaudhuri's voluntary affiliation to English culture and history, especially his passionate support of the British Raj, and his affirmation of India's importance for English rule, recalls Octavio D. Mannoni's theory of "dependence complex" (The Intellectual 26). In this regard, I agree with Mannoni who states that some races feel the cognitive urge to be dependent and be under imperial rule because of their endurance of an unanswered dependence complex.

Chaudhuri's reading of Indian history is biased. He emphasizes that India can progress through British rule. After the Indian independence when the British left India, it results in a repudiation of their duty towards the Indians. They rule before the official declaration of the Indian independence (Thy Hand 26). Chaudhuri

vindicates the detraction of imperialism as Naipaul states with regards to *The Autobiography*, “no better account of the penetration of the Indian mind by the West – and by extension, of one culture by another – will be or can now be written” (*The Overcrowded* 59).

Chaudhuri divides the entire span of Indian civilisation into Indo-Aryan, Indo-Islamic and Indo-European periods and then, he establishes the fact that Indian civilisation is influenced by foreign civilizations by stating that, three of the historical movements force their way into India in successive ages and create three different types of civilization. The civilizations get remained essentially foreign even at the highest point of their development within India. Due to his zeal for a foreign culture's influence on Indian civilization. Chaudhuri is an assimilation of Western traditions within a Bengali heart to emerge as a Bengali humanist.

Modern Civilization

Chaudhuri's parallelism is depicted in his statements regarding *The Ramayana*. His lucid prose degenerates into hyperboles parading his insular sentiments as “if any whole hearted Bonapartist were to be found anywhere in the world at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century they were to be found in Bengal” (*The Autobiography* 105). Though there is an attitude of love for the Bengali intellectuals and literary critics and scholars. But the writer bears a curious mixture of feelings of love and hatred towards the English nation. On the one hand, he admires

Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who argues for English education in India and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Swami Vivekananda due to their objective criticism of the conservative Hindu society and culture. Chaudhuri sees himself as an object in a landscape or an impulse in an inclusive and controlling rhythm and his presentation of the self is tranquil. As a historian, he thinks that he is an impartial judge of men and events. He is a man who speaks to men about religion and politics. He establishes the loss of the distinguished past of India by stating that “we shall never again achieve anything like the greatness and individuality of the Hindu civilization [as] that civilization is dead forever, and cannot be resuscitated” (521). He desires for a psychic change through extolling India's past along with the ideas of the present decay, and consequently the positive force of an imperial civilizing mission.

Dislocation and Alienation

The feel of alienation brings depression, nostalgia and loneliness to that person. The displacement of a person gives him/her so many life experiences, and at the same time lack of integration. Loneliness gives a peculiar new world, in which the alienated person longs for the past days, their family, friends, etc.

Chaudhuri moves from Kishorganj in East Bengal, a municipal town to the cosmopolitan Calcutta, a provincial intellectual moving in an environment. He reveals the kind of attitude; the people of Calcutta maintain towards the people of East Bengal. After abandoning his birthplace

Kishorganj, he fails to cope with the urban environment of Calcutta. The sense of open-heartedness which he witnesses in East Bengal seems to be absent in Calcutta. Hence, his displacement from East Bengal makes him belong geographically nowhere other than England. Though he spends a large portion of his life in Calcutta, he did not find a place among the contemporary intellectuals of Calcutta. In consequence, he develops a sense of aggression and a provocative notion of self. A strong feeling of alienation and dislocation becomes a hallmark of his personality. In this regard, his Autobiography may be taken as an account of a painful uprooting to the city of Calcutta.

Renaissance Awakening

The Renaissance in India is generally considered the pre-political phase of the anti-colonial struggle. It was a period when Indians were mainly engaged in social and cultural preparation for participation in more progressive, radical, and political programs. Bengal Renaissance, a period stretching from the early nineteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth century (Almond 15), is an extended phase of Western influence upon the culture and society of Bengal. This is the time in which European, Hindu and Islamic ideas intermingle with one another and produce a wave of synthesis of ideas and awakening. As a result, Bengal has become the torchbearer in the field of knowledge, culture and society.

Renaissance Humanism, a product of the intellectual awakening of the nineteenth century Bengal Renaissance, has focused on

humanism, liberalism, individualism and democratic tendencies. The movement initiates magnificent outbursts of creativity in literary activity. The Bengal Renaissance begins with the arrival of the poetry of Michael Madhusudan Dutt, the new kind of drama written by Dinbandhu Mitra and the patriotic novels of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. The intellectual, moral and spiritual awakening has a far-reaching impact on the aristocratic and the middle-class section of contemporary Bengali society (Das 21). The concept of Bengali elites the product of nineteenth-century literary and creative urges. By being born and brought up in that particular age, Chaudhuri imbibes the true spirit of the Bengali Renaissance, and his writing is a testimony to the impact of a great age of awakening.

Chaudhuri's importance as an autobiographer comes from the depth of his writings, his erudition, his originality, his controversial, deviant sociological theories and historical interpretation, the pain-taking intellectual approach he practices in dealing with his subjects, the sheer bulk of facts he reveals, and the dignity and the decorum of the kind of English he writes in his endeavour to be forthright and downright in the expression of his philosophy.

Chaudhuri's presentation of India as a moribund society and culture which becomes stagnant due to the lack of dynamism makes him debunk the Hindu culture, which for him is "dead forever and cannot be resuscitated and to hope to create a second civilisation of the same order is for

us today a superannuated piece of folly” (The Autobiography 521). Chaudhuri argues that Indian endeavours in imitating the West are a failure and what one finds is nothing but an immense expense of Europeanization which is debased in nature along with the Hindu and Muslim traits for which we do not assume ourselves as modern in terms of spirit and temper.

Chaudhuri's treatise, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, demonstrates Indian history as consisting of three cycles during each of which a strong and creative foreign influence provided by a primary motive force, viz., the mid-European Aryan, the Muslim and the British respectively...appears very much as an intellectual extension of the wish fulfilment of confessed Anglophile alienated from his own culture (Naik 265).

Chaudhuri eulogizes the British love for the actual which he finds lacking in Indian civilisation. Through his intransigent severance from his countrymen, he entreats his “location as an intellectual outside the dominant group” facilitating him “to be free from ideological constraints or allegiance to any particular national constituency” (Ranasinha 88). As a colonial one needs to dissociate one's self from the amicable and concentrate upon personal achievement before undertaking the authority for others, which involves endeavouring towards an honest dialogue with his own “undeveloped” society (Rowe-Evans 27). In this context, I support William Walsh's arguments who considers *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* as one of the finest

examples of this genre to appear in English in this century and the most significant, single discursive work to be written about the love and hate of Indian-British relationships. In an interview with *The Times of London*, Chaudhuri utters:

People are about half and half, against me and for me. Previously all were against me. I know I am extreme. It is like a tug-of-war. I cannot stand up straight or the other side will pull me down. But I know my exaggerations (Iyengar 601).

Chaudhuri reiterates the path of his estrangement and intellectual isolation from the nationalistic overtones championed by his countrymen and contemporaries that emerged to be growingly “impenetrable” (*The Autobiography* 414). His writing is cathartic and his presentation of alienation is liberating for him as evident when he pronounces:

my intellect has indeed, at last, emancipated itself from my country, which has facilitated the dawn of autonomy in him without dislocating or uprooting himself 'from the native soil by a sojourn in a foreign country or schooling (*The Autobiography* 607).

In his overpowering and insistent manner, Chaudhuri exposes the emptiness of age-old Indian traditions which govern our system of values, family and social life and thus enables the readers to reassess the principles, ethics and measures they have lived by. The book relates his mental and intellectual development, his life and growth in Calcutta, his observations of vanishing landmarks, the connotation of this is dual—changing Indian situation and historical

forces that was making exit of British from India an imminent affair.

Conclusion

An astonishing work of self-discovery, Chaudhuri's *The Autobiography* unfolds chronologically the personal history of a young man of scholarly taste and temperament (Munos). Here, personal, eastern and western history has vividly been presented throughout the text. By connecting the account of his personal life to the evolution of Indian history, the narrative remains a fascinating account of British imperialism and its impact on Indian society and culture. The *Autobiography* remains documentary evidence of the anglophile his passionate relationship with England and the British Empire. Indian Renaissance gave rise to study of English literature thoughts, philosophies and books of history. Over political movements it has some influence and later on it was perfectly adopted by political movements. Thus, Chaudhuri's essay relates his mental and intellectual development, his life and growth in Calcutta, his observations of vanishing landmarks, the connotation of this is dual—changing Indian situation and historical forces that was making exit of British from India an imminent affair.

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