



Sahitya Akademi



India International Centre

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meet the author

Amit Chaudhuri





Amit Chaudhuri is one of a new generation of Indian writers in English whose main focus is to project, not the eternal and mythic India of Orientalist fantasy, but the complex and cosmopolitan reality of the post-Independence nation of today. As Chaudhuri states in his first introductory essay, "Modernity and the Vernacular," in *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*, modern India is a complicated blend of "tradition, history, community and change." The challenge confronting the modern Indian artist is to foreground these new cultural variations and altered sensibilities through forms and idioms that reflect their multivalent perspectives.

Born on 15 May 1962, Amit Chaudhuri was educated at Cathedral and John Connon High School, Mumbai, followed by a year at Elphinstone College. He then took the British 'O' and 'A' level examinations by correspondence through Wolsey Hall, Oxford. He read English at Uni-

versity College, London, taking his B.A. with First Class Honours in 1986. He then went up to Balliol College, Oxford, as a Dervorguilla Scholar, for his D.Phil (1993). Chaudhuri was appointed Creative Arts Fellow at Wolfson College, Oxford, from 1992-95; and then till April 1999 he was Leverhulme Special Research Fellow at the Department of English, University of Cambridge, where he taught the Commonwealth and International Literatures paper of the English Tripos. In 2003 he was Adjunct Professor of Creative Writing at Columbia University in the U.S. He is now a full-time writer living in Kolkata.

Chaudhuri's first work, *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991), comprises a 35,000-word novella of the same name and nine short stories. The novella met with immediate critical acclaim, winning the Betty Trask Award of the Society of Authors for the best first novel of the year as well as the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book (Eurasia): in addition, it was shortlisted for the 1991 *Guardian* Fiction Prize. It tells the story of one summer vacation taken by Sandeep, a ten-year-old boy living in Mumbai, who visits his uncle's home in Kolkata with his mother. The final moment of the novella distils in a single image the evanescent moods of that magical summer. Sandeep and his cousins hold their breath as they catch a glimpse of a cuckoo, that most elusive of birds. Sensing



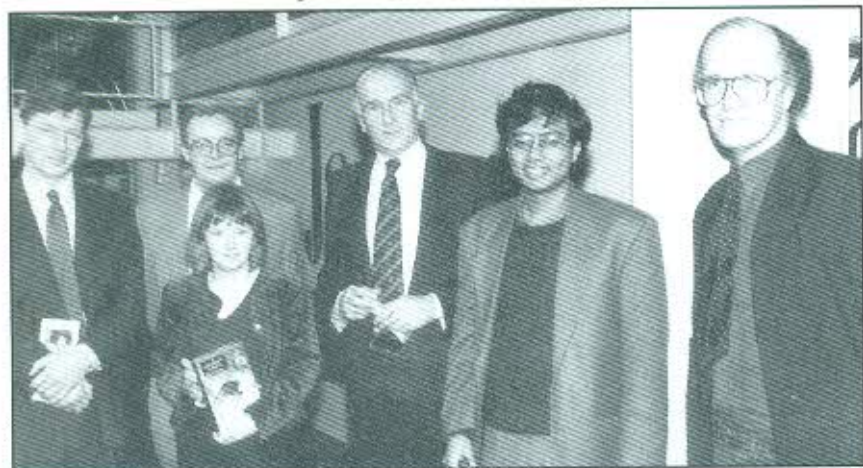
Receiving the Betty Trask Award from Roy Jenkins at the Inner Temple, Inns of Court, London, 1991

their gaze the bird “flew off—not flew off, really, but melted, disappeared, from the material world. As they watched, a delicate shyness seemed to envelop it, and drew a veil over their eyes.”

His second novel, *Afternoon Raag* (1993) followed its predecessor in scoring notable successes – it won the 1993 Southern Arts Literature Prize, and the Encore Award of the Society of Authors for the best second novel. The protagonist is an unnamed Indian man attending Oxford University, but his mental universe effortlessly spans the two poles between which the narrative circles—Oxford and its environs on the one hand, and Kolkata and Mumbai on the other. The novel has been described as ‘plot-less,’ but the structured Eurocentric plot has

the Bengali middle class. The characters are erstwhile Hindu refugees from East Bengal—the older generation still maintains its slow dialects and unhurried ways while the younger generation is frustrated, impatient, restless. The protagonist Bhaskar is deeply concerned with politics, or rather, a utopian involvement with a revolutionary Marxist ideology. Nevertheless, it is through simple human situations like Bhaskar’s marriage, and another character, Khuku’s unremarkable decision to re-establish contact with her childhood friend Mini, rather than through any dramatic social or political upheaval, that the novel gestures towards new beginnings and the renewal of hope.

The omnibus volume of these first three works entitled *Freedom Song: Three Novels*,



The *Guardian* Fiction Prize Shortlist, 1991

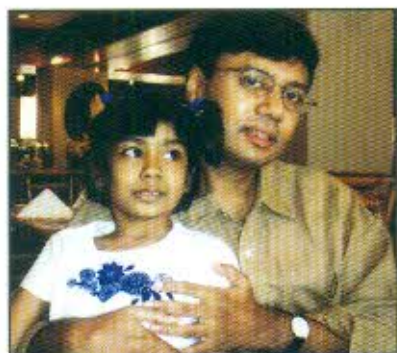
From L-R: Alan Judd, Tim Radford (Literary Editor), Jane Rogers, Jim Marwick (Managing Director, *Guardian*), Amit Chaudhuri, Iain Sinclair

little to do, in Chaudhuri’s aesthetic, with the multivalence of life, which requires a freer form. As the title of this novel suggests, Chaudhuri has his own metaphor for this free-flowing, recursive, allusive form. He compares it to the extemporizing movements of the Indian *raga* (‘raag’ in Bengali) that apparently meanders aimlessly, but actually circles with its own sureness and logic around its dominant mood and tones.

Freedom Song (1998), his third novel which he wrote on an Arts Council Award, shifts to an entirely different segment of

published by Knopf in 1999, was a critical success and a best-seller in the United States: it was the *New York Times*’ ‘Notable Book of the Year’ and one of the New York Public Library’s ‘Twenty-five Books to Remember, 2000.’ It also won the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for Fiction, 2000.

His fourth novel, *A New World* (2000), won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2001. The irony in the title operates on multiple levels. Jayojit, an economist and sometime writer had, like many ambitious Bengalis of his generation, migrated to the



With daughter Radha in Dhaka

new world of heart's desire, the United States of America: he is now back in the old world of Kolkata for a summer vacation with his ten-year-old son Vikram after a long and messy divorce from Amala, his wife of eleven years. The visit itself is uneventful, since life is never as eventful as 'literature.' The 'story', if it can be called that, has all the diffuse, unstructured quality of life itself – its 'meaning' hovering somewhere just beyond the line of sight. The last vignette is of Jayojit absently listening to a Bangladeshi mother on the plane "exhorting her child to sleep," a simple experience which now eludes his own child. *A New World* captures what Chaudhuri describes in his essay on Tagore entitled "The Flute of Modernity" as "the poignancy of the trajectory of Bengali middle-class life, with its *bhadralok* propriety, gentility, rationality, and its ironic lack of fulfillment."

Real Time (2002) is a collection of fifteen short stories and two free verse reminiscences. Many of the stories in *Real Time* focus the hybridity of the Bengali middle class, with its distinctive blend of the colonial and the ancestral, which, paradoxically, coexist without strain. There is an unsuspected connection between *Real Time* and Chaudhuri's next work, an assesment of Lawrence's poetry which was his doctoral dissertation at Oxford—*D.H. Lawrence and Difference: Postcoloniality and the Poetry of the Present* (2003). This relates to a common use of the English language to express a radical,

marginalised consciousness. Chaudhuri studies the canonical English poet from his own particular location as a postcolonial subject, discovering from Lawrence how subversive form in an appropriated language rather than declared content can articulate the oppositional consciousness.

Amit Chaudhuri is also a trained and critically acclaimed singer in the North Indian classical tradition; his musical recitals have received high praise from various newspapers and journals, including the *Times of India*, the *Hindustan Times*, *Ananda Bazar Patrika* and *India Today*. He learned singing from his mother, the well-known exponent of Tagore songs and devotionals, Bijoya Chaudhuri, and, extensively, from the late Pandit Govind Prasad Jaipurwale of the Kunwar Shyam Gharana and Pandit A.T. Kanan. He has performed at several venues, including the National Centre of Performing Arts and the Nehru Centre, Mumbai; the India International Centre and the India Habitat Centre, Delhi; the Dover Lane Music Circle, the Sangeet Research Academy, the Bhowanipore Sangeet Sammelan, all in Kolkata; the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune; the Bengal Foundation, Dhaka; the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan and the Nehru Centre, London; at the California Institute for Integrated Studies, San Francisco and at Columbia University, New York. HMV has released two cassettes of his singing, and a CD was released in 2002 by LotusPrint.



With wife Rosinka and daughter Radha at Trafalgar Square, London

A Select Bibliography

Books

- A Strange and Sublime Address* (London: Heinemann, 1991; N.Y.: Knopf, 1999)
- Afternoon Raag* (London: Heinemann, 1993; N.Y.: Knopf, 1999)
- Freedom Song* (London: Picador, 1998; N.Y.: Knopf, 1999)
- A New World* (London: Picador, 2000; N.Y.: Knopf, 2000)
- Real Time* (London: Picador, 2002; N.Y.: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002)

Collected Editions

- Freedom Song: Three Novels [A Strange and Sublime Address, Afternoon Raag, Freedom Song]* (N.Y.: Knopf, 1999)
- Three Novels [(A Strange and Sublime Address, Afternoon Raag, Freedom Song)]* (London: Picador, 2000)

Edited Text

- The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature* (London: Picador, 2002)



Receiving the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for Fiction, 2000, with novelist Mona Simpson

Literary Criticism

- D.H. Lawrence and 'Difference': Postcoloniality and the Poetry of the Present* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2003)

Anthologies

- Chaudhuri's fiction is represented in *Mirrorwork: 50 Years of Indian Writing, 1947-1997*, ed. Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West (N.Y.: Henry Holt, 1997)

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- Chaudhuri, Amit. "The Flute of Modernity." *Reviews of Rabindranath Tagore: An Anthology and Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man*, both edited by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson. *The New Republic*, October 19, 1998.
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A Chronology



Receiving Sahitya Akademi Award from
Prof. Gopi Chand Narang, 2002

1962	Born in Kolkata	1992-95	Creative Arts Fellow at Wolfson College, Oxford
1966-78	School education and pre-University education in Mumbai	1995-99	Leverhulme Special Research Fellow, Department of English, Cambridge
1986	B.A. in English with First Class Honours from University College, London	1998	Daughter Aruna (Radha) born
1987	Graduate student at Balliol College, Oxford	1999	<i>Freedom Song: Three Novels</i> selected 'Notable Book of the Year' by <i>New York Times</i>
1991	Married to Rosinka Khastgir	2000	The same book selected among 'Twenty-five Books to Remember, 2000' by New York Public Library
	Shortlisted in the Guardian Fiction Prize for <i>A Strange and Sublime Address</i>		Won <i>Los Angeles Times</i> Book Prize
	The same book won the Betty Trask Award and Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book (Eurasia)	2002	Sahitya Akademi Award for <i>A New World</i>
1993	D.Phil from Balliol College, Oxford	2003	Adjunct Professor of Creative Writing, Columbia University, U.S.A.
	Southern Arts Literature Prize and Encore Award of the Society of Authors for <i>Afternoon Raag</i>		