

Historiographic Metafictional Technique in Amit Chaudhuri's Fiction

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Abstract. This article focuses on how Amit Chaudhuri uses history against fiction and how he represents reality against fiction. In the nineteenth century, literature and history were considered branches of the same tree of learning, a tree which sought to interpret experience for the purpose of guiding and elevating man. Then came the separation that resulted in the distinct disciplines of literary and historical studies today, despite the fact that the realist novel shared many similar beliefs about the possibility of writing factually about observable reality. Fiction about history is called historiographic metafiction. This article explains how Amit Chaudhuri uses history within fiction in his novels.

Keywords : Postmodern; historiography; metafiction; history; migration; classical music.

Historiographic metafiction is a term coined by Canadian literary theorist Linda Hutcheon in the late 1980s. The term is used for works of fiction which combine the literary devices of metafiction with historical fiction. It is passionate by history. Postmodern historiographic metafiction deliberately and self-reflexively works to achieve two things – it carries historical context into the text in recognition of history's authority and power and it instantaneously calls into question its limitations. By introducing features of fiction within historical context, fact is exposed as an author's dispensed meaning or particular explanation of an incident. Historiographic metafiction is a new critical innovation polishing writer's imagination in reciting history in the present literature. In the words of Linda Hutcheon :

Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact or fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity.

(*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 1988 : 93)

A majority of novels in India have been written in response to historical movements or events such as the Gandhian movement, imperial rule, partition of

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the country, the emergence of new India. Even after independence, there are many historical events like Bangladesh freedom war, Indo-China war, Emergency rule , death of Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, demolition of Babri mosque , Mumbai terrorist attack etc. which attract the writers to write upon them. In the post Rushdie era we find a number of writers like Amitav Ghosh , Rohinton Mistry, Aravind Adiga and Amit Chaudhuri who weave the plots of their novels around any specific contemporary events and show its impact on common people. *Freedom Song* (1998) and *A New World* (2000) are two such novels of Amit Chaudhuri. *Freedom Song* is written against the background of the demolition of Babri mosque which happened in the early years of the last decade of the twentieth century. The city in which people of different castes, religions and customs passed their life with harmonious relationship begin to centralise themselves on the basis of religion. The whole city faces many communal riots without their direct involvement in the demolition of Babri mosque. *A New World* is the fourth novel of Amit Chaudhuri which focuses upon the life of common people after economic liberalisation policy in India.

The distorting of boundaries among fiction and history and the constructedness of history through discourse are major themes in Amit Chaudhuri's novels. Like other postmodern writers, Chaudhuri does not consider history as a consistent field and treats ideas such as truth and reality and objectivity in an ironic fashion . Chaudhuri's use of intertextuality , his mixing of historical and fictional characters and his rewriting of the narrator's and the character's identities all point how reality and history are not stable ideas and they are rewritten and recreated continuously. Amit Chaudhuri imaginatively unites the factual and the fictional or the real with the unreal carrying out a mixture of the two in his works. The corpus of Amit Chaudhuri's fiction enlarges while analyzing through wide angle lenses of themes. His novels are exclusive mixture of migration, travel , fact, fiction, classical music, and landscape covered under the cloak of fiction.

Chaudhuri also restructures history through different methods of narration such as truth exposed through family history and conversation between different characters in his novels. Since Chaudhuri belongs to the Bengali culture and is deeply attached with it, he shows different historical incidences and decisions and its impact on common Bengali middle class people. Bengal was a big province during British India which was later divided into different parts constituting Bangladesh , West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa etc. Many characters of Chaudhuri's novels are those whose ancestors belong to undivided Bengal and had to leave their houses after partition and had to pass their lives as refugees before settlement in Independent India. Chaudhuri reminds us about this partition of Bengal through family history in his novels . In *A Strange and Sublime Address* Chhotomama tells Sandeep that their family lived in Sylhet, which is now in Bangladesh , when India was one big piece and the British ruled over them :

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'The place made Sandeep remember what Shonamama had once told of consciousness. Miles separated one village, sometimes one house from another. Letter-writing was the only means of communication – there were no telephones. A mountain or a river formed the border to our world. Our world was small, and things loomed large and astonishing for us : you wouldn't understand.' Where was this ?' Sandeep had asked , wondering if it were a real place, or something Shonamama had dreamt up. In Sylhet,' replied Shonamama. 'Sylhet is now in Bangladesh'. 'Sylhet'... murmured Sandeep. 'When India was one big piece, and the British ruled us. When our father died, we moved to Shillong. In Shillong,' Shonamama said , 'there are mountains and waterfalls.' (*A Strange and Sublime Address* 2001: 53)

In *Afternoon Raag* the narrator tells similar story regarding his forefathers or ancestor's native land. The family had once been landowners in Sylhet, (now in Bangladesh) but in due course of time all family members had to be scattered in different regions of independent India and gradually became poor; and the house in Bangladesh became a memory for them :

The family had once been landowners, and then they scattered and gradually became poor , settling down in towns on this side of the border, while the great house became a memory in Bangladesh, with a few relatives still living in it. I remember in childhood travelling with my parents to a town in Assam and being taken in a car to the outskirts , and entering a place with electricity where people lived in a small house among other houses; we were greeted by a family : a father, his daughter, her husband and a child, and the old man had the same surname as I. My father addressed him with the Bengali word for 'paternal uncle', and they spoke in the Sylheti dialect, and fragments of that world in which the remnants of my father's family lived came alive in the light of a hurricane lamp. (*Afternoon Raag* : 245)

The narrator's family was a renowned family in Sylhet. Due to partition of India or Bengal , some members remained in the ancestral house and some liked to live in independent India and so they scattered in different places. *Freedom Song* tells the similar story regarding the life of Khuku and Mini whose childhood days passed

in Sylhet. In *A New World* Jayojit himself connects his family with East Bengal, Bangladesh :

His own parents were of East Bengali origin, the father coming from a land owning family in Chittagong, the mother from Mymensingh. Apparently a few distant relatives had stayed on in the ancestral houses; a small businessman, a teacher – they were rarely in touch with them" (*A New World* 2000 : 9-10)

Such repeated glimpse of Bengal partition indicates that this historical event is still alive in the memory of common Bengali people. They have not forgotten those painful days when they had to leave their ancestral houses, relatives, neighbours and everything to survive at a new place due to partition. Since Chaudhuri himself belongs to such a family whose ancestors passed their life as refugees, he gives the glimpses of this incidence through family tree of different characters in his novels.

Chaudhuri presents another historical event related to the life of Swami Vivekananda in his third novel *Freedom Song* (1998). He shows how Bengali people give proper respect to their great men like Rabindranath Tagore, Subhash Chandra Bose, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and Swami Vivekananda. They encourage their children to study the lives of such great men. Bhaskar is such a boy in *Freedom Song* who likes to study Yoga books and biographical tales. Reading about the life of Swami Vivekananda and his journey from an ordinary man called Narendra nath Dutta to Vivekananda, he goes into day dream and connects himself with Vivekananda at every place where he went. For a long time, he remembered every detail of the story and it moved through his mind like a movie. He felt that he was present with Vivekananda when he asked Ramkrishna Paramhans, have you seen God ? He also felt to be present when Vivekananda addressed the Parliament of World religions with his historical speech which brought fame and glory to Indian culture and religion during the colonial period. Chaudhuri fulfils dual purpose with this historical representation of Vivekananda. On the one hand he tells about this historical incidence to his readers which is unforgettable for every Indian. The philosophy of Swami Vivekanand had glorified our country during the colonial period of India. On the other hand Chaudhuri presents psychology of child's mind as Bhaskar felt to be present with Vivekananda :

For a long time after, Bhaskar remembered every detail of this story, and he seemed to be there with Vivekananda when he was Narendranath and wandering from temple to church, and he entered the strange world where, with Narendranath, he

met Ramkrishna, and he was there with Ramkrishna as well, when he sat in a trance and saw Kali before him, appearing little by little, her blue skin, the pink of her tongue, the black of her hair, and then becoming whole, and he came back to the real world with a little of the smoke and incense and terror still upon him. (*Freedom Song* 1998 : 62)

The novel *Freedom Song* also focuses upon another historical event of demolition of Babri mosque in 1992. The novel is written against the background of this event which brought a gap between two communities – Hindus and Muslims and started communal riots between them. The incidence of demolition of Babri mosque held in Ayodhya but its impact was so much that the whole countrymen involved in it and even the people of Calcutta were not untouched. Chaudhuri has shown how the feelings of common people, who were not directly involved in it, changed after it. The conversation between Khuku and Mini shows the impact of this incidence :

I mean you'll never be able to appease them', said Mini. What if one mosque had gone – for hundreds of temples had been destroyed before. She could not understand what the fuss was about. By the lakes, the trees with outspread branches were bare. A few branches were playing football; further away, someone had lit a fire and a funnel of smoke was rising from it. Promises, always promises. No sooner had the mosque gone down then the government had promised that it would be built again. Who'll rebuild those temples? she asked. That's right,' said Khuku. None talks about them. (86)

The people of India are very much attached with their religion and customs and this feeling centralises them to save their religious thoughts. In the novel *Freedom Song* we find conversations between characters upon religious activities. The whole city is under the cover of communal riots started after the breaking of Babri mosque and all people are bound to live at their homes. Khuku is anxious about her childhood friend, Mini, who lives with her elder sister in an area where riots had started. The situation has also compelled lower caste people like labourers, maid servants and sweepers, whose livelihood are based upon their daily wages, to pass their life at home. Khuku's maid servant could not come to work in this situation because a riot started in her mohalla.

Amit Chaudhuri's fourth novel *A New World* also touches some important historical landmarks of the country. The novel presents a small glimpse of the era of Indira Gandhi and economic liberalisation of the country. Indira Gandhi was a

famous Prime Minister of India before 1990s whose period is known for some bold decisions like Missile techniques, Emergency, Bangladesh freedom war and many more. These were such decisions for which she is known as an Iron lady. In the novel *A New World* Chaudhuri presents the glory of Indira's era during the father-son conversation between Admiral Chatterjee and Jayojit :

'Whatever you might think of her, she's gusty', the Admiral had said. 'The Russians respect her, the Americans fear her'; those words returning to him like the lines of a nursery rhyme. Even now, 'his father believed that India had declined since that woman's death.' (*A New World* 2000 : 139)

The small narrative reveals the real feelings of common people about Indira Gandhi. Another important historical event of postcolonial India is gradual liberalisation policy which came during the time of Rajiv Gandhi. Amit Chaudhuri connects his fourth novel *A New World* with this historical event. Jayojit, the protagonist, is a renowned economist who taught at Buffalo then. When Rajiv Gandhi became Prime Minister, he gathered advisors around himself mainly from his Cambridge friends for suggestions regarding economic growth of the country. Chaudhuri here mixes historical facts with fictional character. Jayojit sent a plan for gradual liberalisation to Rajiv Gandhi and he believed that nothing but economic reform could change India from a country living from borrowing from the west into a productive and competitive one :

During the time of Rajiv Gandhi government, when the Prime Minister had been gathering advisors around himself, mainly from among his Cambridge friends, someone had recommended Jayojit, who was then teaching at Buffalo. Jayojit had sent him a plan, suggesting gradual liberalization; thus he had been there, in a sense, at the beginning. In the new, as yet unfinished, brickwork of India's new economic order, Jayojit had laid an early and important cornerstone. Nothing but economic reform, he believed could change India from a country living on borrowings from the west into a productive and competitive one. (30)

Moreover, Amit Chaudhuri gives proper space to historical events in his writings. His writings display a balance between the real and the imaginary in a manner. In the novel *Immortals* we find real characters like Lata Mangeshkar, Asha Bhonsle, Aamir Khan who are living legends in the musical world of the country. On the other side there are imaginary characters like Ram Lal, Shyam Lal etc. who are renowned persons in classical world. Through mixture of such real

Historiographic Metafictional Technique in Amit Chaudhuri's Fiction and fictitious characters, Chaudhuri shows the plight of those artists who have to sell their souls by singing film-songs in place of classical songs only to get livelihood in the modern era of globalization. With the coming of new musical instruments and their easy learning, classical instruments are losing their charm which require much labour and sincerity. Even Shyam Lal, the great classical singer, gives permission to his son to learn those new instruments by thinking that they will provide at least livelihood to his son :

All these western instruments... They were glamorous because they'd arrived, intact, after a long journey; once here they could merge intrepidly into the texture of almost any musical background – it was not as if Shyamji wasn't won over their virtues and innate youthful qualities himself. A man who could play a western instrument would have always have a livelihood in today's world : so it seemed to the old music families... (*The Immortals* 2009 : 241-242)

Thus, Amit Chaudhuri mixes the historical event with fictional characters. In all his writings, Amit Chaudhuri's engagement with history is not of the same kind as that of a historian, but this does not in any way lessen its significance as historical fiction. He shows the impact of any particular historical event upon the daily life of common people. Chaudhuri's fiction reveals that the novelist's involvement with history is his prime obsession. His fiction is imbued with both social and historical consciousness. Chaudhuri is a novelist who virtually bends his novels to the needs of history; they largely derive their purpose and shape from it. The image of the changing India, politically and socially, cast a deep shadow on Chaudhuri's mind. He also admits that his campus life and travels within and without the country contributed to his development as a creative writer.

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