

# 1 Dimensions of Defamiliarization in Amit Chaudhuri's Afternoon 2 Raag

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5 *Received: 15 December 2019 Accepted: 1 January 2020 Published: 15 January 2020*

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## 7 **Abstract**

8 Amit Chaudhuri is a versatile writer and a recipient of various prestigious awards. Chaudhuri  
9 does not write about a great event, hero, heroics, or history in his works. Rather, he presents  
10 the familiar, quotidian reality of our daily, mundane life in a way that they become strange  
11 and interesting. He does this through the magic of his words. Chaudhuri perceives magic in  
12 the ordinary and considers it as an eternal thing. So, he is a realist who defamiliarizes the  
13 familiar through his poetic and charismatic language. The concept of defamiliarization  
14 emerged from Russian Formalism and proved more effective as a literary concept. Russian  
15 Formalists held the view that all literature is defamiliarized. Defamiliarization is basically a  
16 process, where, literary techniques and devices refresh our perceptions of the usual,  
17 commonplace things. In Amit Chaudhuri's novels, all such literary techniques and tropes have  
18 been employed that renews our perceptions of the ordinary, familiar things and defamiliarize  
19 it. This research paper will present how Chaudhuri has defamiliarized the familiar, in his  
20 novel, Afternoon Raag.

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22 **Index terms**— defamiliarization, strange, interesting, perception, refreshes literary tropes.

## 23 **1 Introduction**

24 mit Chaudhuri, born in 1962 in Calcutta, and brought up in Bombay, is one of the most celebrated and eminent  
25 writers of today. He is a successful novelist, keenly perceptive short story writer, a competent critic, a poet of  
26 distinction, and a wonderful classical singer. He has to his credit several novels, short stories, poetry, critical  
27 works, and reviews, etc. His very first novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address*, won the Betty Trask Award in 1991  
28 and Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the first best book. His second novel, *Afternoon Raag* published in 1993,  
29 was the winner of the Southern Arts Literature Prize. His later novels such as *Freedom Song*, *A New World*, *The  
30 Immortals* brought to his credit awards like Los Angeles Times Book Prize, Sahitya Akademi Award, Rabindra  
31 Puraskar, Infosys Prize, etc. He was also elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 2009. Presently he  
32 is a professor of Contemporary Literature at the University of East Anglia, England. Chaudhuri does not invent  
33 a great story or plot in his novels to capture the interest of the readers, rather; he does so by defamiliarizing  
34 the familiar. His novels amply illustrate how he defamiliarizes the familiar, poeticizes the ordinary, and make  
35 humdrum seem exciting.

36 The concept of 'ostranenie', which in translation has become known as defamiliarization, was introduced by  
37 Victor Shklovsky, a Russian formalist, in his essay, 'Art as Technique' in 1917. The Russian word 'ostranenie'  
38 literally means estrangement or to make things strange. The Russian Formalists were devoted to the study  
39 of experimental, avant-garde literature and art. Their primary concern was the 'literariness' of the text, or to  
40 put it in simple words, specifying those technical devices that distinguish literature from the ordinary language.  
41 Shklovsky made a point that in most activities, our perception becomes a habitual and an automatic process,  
42 where we are often unaware of, or take for granted our view of things and their relations. He further argued  
43 that we could never retain the freshness of our perception of things and activities because the process of our

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44 social and cultural life causes them to become 'naturalized' or 'automatized'. And therefore, it becomes the  
45 distinctive function of literature to give us back our awareness of things as if we see them for the very first  
46 time. It is the unique quality of the poetic or literary language to renew our perceptions and make us see things  
47 differently, in a new light, producing the effect of defamiliarization. To put it in the words of Harry Blamires,  
48 "Defamiliarization is the process by which art can refresh perceptions that are 'automatized' by daily habituation.  
49 Whenever an act or an object is described in such a way that our habitual notion of it is transformed, the process  
50 of defamiliarization is at work. It is operative too when the literary presentation is punctured by intrusions  
51 which destroy the illusion of reality" (358). Indeed the Russian Formalists held the opinion that all literature  
52 is defamiliarization. Shklovsky believed that defamiliarization could be found almost everywhere form is found.  
53 Defamiliarization is, therefore, all about those literary techniques and devices that make the familiar things seem  
54 unfamiliar. Chaudhuri employs all such literary techniques and devices that renews and refreshes our perceptions  
55 of the ordinary, familiar things and make them look strange and interesting. Defamiliarization is, therefore, about  
56 different perspectives, putting things on a cosmopolitan level, literary tropes such as irony, simile, metaphor, and  
57 various other techniques that tend to broaden our horizon of perception, renews our perception of the ordinary,  
58 commonplace things and make it look delightful and fascinating. To sum up, Defamiliarization is about creating  
59 magic out of the ordinary through various literary tropes and techniques.

60 Afternoon Raag, eloquently praised by reviewers, is the second novel by Amit Chaudhuri. It is about the  
61 life of an Indian graduate student at Oxford who is shy, young and, romantic. Through his wellarticulated,  
62 structured and rhythmic prose, the author tells us how the narrator feels at Oxford, how he reminisces about  
63 his parents, about his guru who gave him music lessons, about his homeland and how he interacts with his  
64 friends Mandira, Shehnaz and Mr. Sharma at Oxford. It is about the protagonist's perception, perspective and,  
65 emotional state at a place away from his homeland. Nothing much happens in the novel unless small, daily  
66 things are called happenings. The author has also vividly described the lanes and buildings, people, and places  
67 of Oxford and India as well. The novel does not deal with some great events or story; it is about the poetry of  
68 the commonplace. Chaudhuri crafts his sentences so beautifully and magically that even the daily happenings  
69 become a poetic experience. The novelist renews our perceptions by investing his work with beautiful imagery,  
70 metaphors, irony, analogies, and comparisons, using different perspectives, putting things on the cosmopolitan  
71 level, imparting aesthetic quality, creating unexpected situations, structures, etc. Though nothing much happens  
72 in the novel, yet, the readers are kept captivated by the sheer allure of his language.

73 Let us consider the very title of the novel, Afternoon Raag. In Indian Classical Music, there are different  
74 'raags' (musical piece) that are supposed to be sung or performed at various intervals in a day and for different  
75 moods as well. Afternoon Raag is especially the raag for the afternoon period. Further, classical music is not only  
76 tremendously soothing and relaxing, but is of great help in curing various diseases and psychiatric disorders in  
77 human beings. 'Raag' in the title itself clearly shows the novelist's love for Indian Classical Music. 'Afternoon' is  
78 there in the title because the novelist himself is fond of the afternoon as the time of intermission, and in India, it is  
79 the period of rest. Regarding the title, the novelist says in 'Aalap: In Conversation with Amit Chaudhuri', "The  
80 original title was Madhuvanti and the Afternoon Raag. The publishers made me remove Madhuvanti because of  
81 all their problems with bookshops and booksellers not understanding in England a word like Madhuvanti" (177).  
82 Chaudhuri's inclination towards music is apparent in his works. There is no denying the fact that, of course, the  
83 novel is a beautiful piece of work in the field of literature that is so closely connected to music.

84 Imagery plays a vital role in bringing about the effect of defamiliarization as it renews the perception of the  
85 familiar. Chaudhuri considers the art of writing or the ability to write as the renovation of our perceptions  
86 of the physical world where we live. Chaudhuri's work is replete with beautiful images, and it reminds us  
87 of Wordsworth's images that are of arresting beauty. Though such images are too numerous to take note of  
88 individually, but, some of the more vivid and striking ones could not be passed without comment. For example,  
89 we all are familiar with the act of cutting our crescent-shaped nails and then throwing them. There is nothing  
90 unusual about it; it is a common act and a sight, but, in the novel the narrator has presented it differently by  
91 saying that his father, after clipping his nails "sneezes explosively, as he customarily does, sending the crescent-  
92 shaped nail-clippings flying into the universe" (22). Let us see in another example, how beautifully, with the  
93 magic of his words, the author defamiliarizes the playing of harmonium, a musical instrument, by his mother:

94 Then my mother will settle on the rug and unclip the bellows, pulling and pushing them with a mild aquatic  
95 motion with her left hand, the fingers of the right hand flowering upon the keys, the wedding bangle suspended  
96 around her wrist. Each time the bellows are pushed, the round holes on the back open and close like eyes. (19).

97 It is thus apparent that through the charisma of his words and poetic language, the novelist creates pictures  
98 imparting a pictorial quality to his works and renews our perception of the usual, mundane things that we see  
99 around us in our daily life. We come across a lot of such defamiliarized, beautiful visual images in the novel.

100 Apart from visual imagery, the novelist has a fascination for sound and sound patterns. Indeed, the novelist  
101 possesses this unique gift of acute sense for sounds in great measures perhaps due to his training as a classical  
102 musician. Music is an indispensable part of our lives and is found everywhere in nature, in humans, though we  
103 don't realize it as it becomes an automated process. It is the significant task of literature to make us aware  
104 and renew our perceptions of the familiar, ordinary, daily routine things of our lives. As there is a rhythm in  
105 our heart beat, therefore, the rhythm of music directly touches our hearts. When this rhythm of our heart beat  
106 is affected, our health is affected. Music is present in our expressions of celebrations, happiness, sadness, etc.

107 Music could be said to be the sweet and soothing sounds that vibrate and create an immense aesthetic pleasure,  
108 feeling, and beauty that overcomes the sadness and sorrows of our lives. So music is recognized as one of the fine  
109 arts that brings permanent peace and solace to the human world. It is indeed man's expression of the deeper  
110 converse, with the innermost spirit, which is materialized through the medium of tones, tunes, and melodies. It  
111 can be said to be the language of man's deeper soul like literature. For example, the cries of a baby have certain  
112 rhythm, Volume XX Issue III Version I 12 ( G )

113 though, we are unaware of it because we become used to it. It is the talent of the artist that makes him  
114 observant and aware of such perceptions. The novel, Afternoon Raag is replete with sounds often musical and  
115 sometimes non-musical that has been rendered variously. Chaudhuri can register all kinds of sounds. He can  
116 even spiritualize the normal morning noises in the college. Let us see how he describes various sounds in the  
117 undergraduate college of Shehnaz:

118 Noises were transmitted through walls and doors; a radio; a knowing, crowded murmur in the kitchen; footsteps  
119 in the corridor; the main door shutting; the firm but almost non physical sound of footsteps on the gravel; there  
120 were many lives in the building made transiently one by sound. (7).

121 In the works of Amit Chaudhuri, we come across the beautiful mingling of music and literature, probably,  
122 because the place where he belongs to is Bengal, which has always been a rich reservoir of these. Bengal has made  
123 an immense contribution in the field of Indian music, both classical and folk, and has tremendously contributed  
124 in the field of literature as well. This place also reminds us of our literary legend, Rabindra Nath Tagore whose  
125 commendable contributions in the above mentioned fields are our treasures. As the novelist, has developed close  
126 ties with India, particularly Bengal, and therefore, the novelist's love for Bengali culture, music, literature and  
127 language is apparent in his works.

128 Analogy and simile are the other two literary tropes that produce the effect of defamiliarization. In his works,  
129 Chaudhuri uses these tropes in his own inimitable way, which impart it a sense of beauty and strangeness.  
130 The novel abounds with such remarkable analogies and comparisons. To cite a few striking ones, early in the  
131 morning, narrator's mother "moves gently as a mouse"(15); the scar on his mother's skin is printed "like a  
132 radiant star"(16); when the narrator's mother sings, "breath tips in the swelling diaphragm as water does in  
133 a pitcher"(19). Further, the narrator says that in a club that was frequented mainly by company executives,  
134 general managers, and directors who were "Dressed alike in tie and white pin-striped shirt and dark suit, they  
135 looked to me like angels" (20). Narrator's friend, Sharma, out of his love for the English language, would use new  
136 idioms and words that he had picked up during the day, in every context, just "as a child who has been given  
137 a gift of new shoes spends a euphoric period wearing them everywhere" (32). To cite another example, let us  
138 see how the author defamiliarizes the well known act of students enthusiastically looking for their letters while  
139 staying in the hostel, far off from their homes:

140 From about half past nine to ten, there was a hubbub as students stooped or stood on tip-toe to peep into  
141 Pigeon-holes, and sorted and sifted letters, and the mail-room had an air of optimism, of being in touch with the  
142 universe, found nowhere else in Oxford. When there were letters for me -the cheap, blue Indian aerogrammes  
143 from my mother -they lay there innocently like gifts from a Santa Claus, they did not seem material at all, but  
144 magical, like signs. (12).

145 Thus the author's imagination can land far and wide to bring in analogies like the above mentioned, where  
146 letters from one's native place are like gifts from Santa Claus. The author has beautifully captured the emotional  
147 state of the students living quite far away from their homeland. Chaudhuri has a distinctive talent for making the  
148 usual, familiar things seem unusual, unfamiliar, and fascinating. Nothing that can kindle the imagination of the  
149 writer can escape his senses, even the very minute things cannot escape from his observation and gets mentioned  
150 in his works. The author is capable of bringing in least expected analogies and comparisons that reminds us of  
151 the metaphysical poets. In another example, while on his visit to a South Indian cafe, he compares the "Tamil  
152 waiters who, dressed in an impeccable uniform, looked like the soldiers of an ancient army" (45).

153 Amit Chaudhuri is neither didactic nor has contempt for anything, but his disapproval towards certain things  
154 becomes apparent through his use of irony, satire, and humor, the other literary tropes that bring about the  
155 effect of defamiliarization. A few striking examples of such irony could be cited, for example, when the narrator  
156 and his friend, Sharma, were having a comfortable stroll in Oxford, the author says that they were "two Indians  
157 who might never have met in India, feeling at home?"(25). So, defamiliarization is produced when an author  
158 makes his readers perceive his work in a new light, removing the layer of automated perceptions. Such ironical  
159 touches are also a part of Chaudhuri's writings. Let us consider another example where the author puts forth  
160 his strong comments against people who seem to be devout Christians but can curse God at their own whims.  
161 He says, "There is a Church here, in Cowley, for they are devout Christians,?but blaspheming and cursing God  
162 when they feel like"(93). The author further puts it in the above context that these are the people who speak  
163 English that is hardly spoken in any other part of the world anymore, with "queer proverbs and turns, dropped  
164 consonants and vowels, and turn the language like meat inside their mouths"(93). He is conscious of the words,  
165 the accent, the language, be it English or Bengali. Thus language has always been a significant consideration for  
166 the novelist. A person speaking his mother tongue well but finding it inconvenient to command any fluency in  
167 a foreign language is something very natural and obvious. Since the novelist possesses a keen observation, so he  
168 has defamiliarized this familiar situation. Bengalis have a typical accent of putting stress on words, and they do  
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170 this while speaking any language. The narrator amuses the readers by presenting the way his mother  
171 pronounces English words. The effect of defamiliarization becomes apparent when a Bengali person speaks  
172 English in a different accent. The narrator's remark regarding his mother's pronunciation of English becomes  
173 more gripping when he says that she belongs to a culture with a more spacious concept of time. The author puts  
174 it, "Like most Bengalis, she pronounces 'hurt' as 'heart', and 'ship' as 'sheep', for she belongs to a culture with  
175 a more spacious concept of time, which deliberately allows one to naively and clearly expand the vowels;?" (58).

176 The author's imagination recognizes no national frontiers, religion, caste, or culture; it can land anywhere,  
177 at any place or nation to bring in analogies, simile, metaphors, etc. to make his work more engrossing and  
178 captivating. Chaudhuri is an expert in defamiliarizing the familiar through his cosmopolitan attitude. To cite  
179 an example, the author's imagination in describing the Bengalis goes from Bengal to Ireland. The author puts  
180 it, "The Bengalis are like Irish families, except that they are small in height?" (115). Food is a vital metaphor  
181 in his works. Chaudhuri himself admits that he likes good food and can cook well. Let us consider an example,  
182 from the novel, where his food inclination has been presented with a cosmopolitan attitude. The author says, "I  
183 did know the St Giles' Cafe; it was the only place in Oxford that served a strong and dark coffee, with a scorched  
184 South Indian flavour?" (24). It is indeed amusing and entertaining to see in a restaurant when people take their  
185 orders, they are not addressed by their names; but, the food items. Let us see how the novelist puts it in the  
186 novel:

187 When people were called to take their food from the counter, they were not addressed by their names, but by  
188 their orders -'Ham and eggs!' 'Plate of chips!' 'Bacon Sandwitch!' -and without confusion, those who had been  
189 labelled so uniquely rose and walked towards the counter. (24).

190 Chaudhuri does not invent new names for the things he describes to creating something new, rather, he uses  
191 different perspectives to see things in a new light just as Leo Tolstoy had done in *Kholstomer*. It is evident that  
192 a child comprehends the world through his fancies and fantasies; this creates an unusual point of view, which  
193 by itself creates a stronger sense of novelty and strangeness that produces the effect of defamiliarization. The  
194 novel, as we know, is written in the first-person narrative. Now to cite an example, the narrator, as a child,  
195 lived in a flat of a tall building with his family. His mother's close friend, Chitrakaki, used to visit them in the  
196 afternoons, and together, these ladies, after spending quite some time at times, took small naps. There is nothing  
197 unusual in this scene; it is something familiar, but let us see how the perspective of a boy makes it interesting  
198 and unfamiliar: while asleep, "both of them suspended in a hundred feet above the earth without knowing it.  
199 Beneath them the Arabian Sea rushed and the earth moved, while their heads rested on a pillows so soft that  
200 they were like bodies of pure flesh without skeleton"(44). It is the perspective of the narrator as a student that  
201 leads him to perceive Mandira's tutor as "an old don in spectacles" (100).

202 For the novelist, life is the text and language, the source of renewing our perceptions of reality. Aestheticism  
203 also defamiliarizes the familiar. For Chaudhuri, aesthetics and emotions are significant. The author finds certain  
204 aestheticism in the Avadhi language, an old version of Hindi that is still spoken in the villages and so puts it that  
205 "Avadhi is such a poetic language that its most common expressions can bring places and spirits before the eye,  
206 can stir love in the heart"(106). Further, the author's fondness for the vernacular reminds us of his attachment  
207 with the local culture as well. For the author, who has his roots in Sylhet, East Bengal (now Bangladesh), received  
208 education in the elite institutions of Bombay, in University College, London, and Balliol College, Oxford, indeed  
209 possesses the ease of a native speaker in speaking and writing English. Even after spending considerable time  
210 abroad, the author has a deep attachment to the culture of his country, especially that of Bengal and its culture.  
211 He also feels indebted to writers in Indian languages, particularly in Bengali, for helping him mold his career of  
212 creative writing.

213 The novelist has developed close connections with Calcutta. Chaudhuri writes, Calcutta has both physical  
214 tangibility as well as specificity. This remarkable rendering of the physicality of space in his novels provides  
215 immense pleasure to the readers. Chaudhuri himself states that he feels "very uncomfortable with the idea of the  
216 nation"(Aalap,183). Chaudhuri admires those writers who locate their imagination in specific locations without  
217 bothering about the particularity of the nation. Chaudhuri considers Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Pather*  
218 *Panchali* to be an amazing modernist novel though it is just confined to a village, Nischindipur. Chaudhuri  
219 likes to be associated with modernism because it "has a great fascination for the real, for the physical world  
220 outside"(Aalap,162). Chaudhuri can not only render the local culture of India in a fascinating way but also the  
221 local culture of a place in a foreign country. Moreover, the streets are very dear to the author as he puts it,  
222 "street is not only a place which I use for people to go from one place to another. It's a place where a part of  
223 your life is lead. It substitutes as drawing-room, bedroom and other things" (Aalap, 179). And so, the author  
224 vividly renders various intimate spaces in Oxford, Calcutta (now Kolkata) and Bombay (now Mumbai).

225 Amit Chaudhuri is a great realist. In his works, he does not write about some great event or incident, Volume  
226 XX Issue III Version I 14 ( G ) ordinary details of everyday life of an individual like how he gets up in the  
227 morning, how he eats, takes a bath or drives an outdated, difficult-to-start car, and so on. To be precise, his  
228 creative focus falls on the humdrum, quotidian, familiar routine of life, but through the magic of his words and  
229 sublime language, he defamiliarizes the familiar, commonplace things of our life and makes it interesting by  
230 bringing the music and poetry from them. Well, it could be said that defamiliarization is all about the literary  
231 techniques and devices that are used to differentiate the literary language from the ordinary utterances apart

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232 from imparting an aesthetic quality to it. Therefore, we can say that Amit Chaudhuri's works have the beautiful  
233 effect of defamiliarization.

234 **2 Works Cited**

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