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Dimensions of Defamiliarization in Amit Chaudhuri's Afternoon Raag

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

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I. Introduction

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

The concept of 'ostranenie', which in translation has become known as defamiliarization, was introduced by Victor Shklovsky, a Russian formalist, in his essay, 'Art as Technique' in 1917. The Russian word 'ostranenie' literally means estrangement or to make things strange. The Russian Formalists were devoted to the study of experimental, avant-garde literature and art. Their primary concern was the 'literariness' of the text, or to put it in simple words, specifying those technical devices that distinguish literature from the ordinary language. Shklovsky made a point that in most activities, our perception becomes a habitual and an automatic process, where we are often unaware of, or take for granted our view of things and their relations. He further argued that we could never retain the freshness of our perception of things and activities because the process of our social and cultural life causes them to become 'naturalized' or 'automatized'. And therefore, it becomes the distinctive function of literature to give us back our awareness of things as if we see them for the very first time. It is the unique quality of the poetic or literary language to renew our perceptions and make us see things differently, in a new light, producing the effect of defamiliarization. To put it in the words of Harry Blamires, "Defamiliarization is the process by which art can refresh perceptions that are 'automatized' by daily habituation. Whenever an act or an object is described in such a way that our habitual notion of it is transformed, the process of defamiliarization is at work. It is operative too when the literary presentation is punctured by intrusions which destroy the illusion of reality" (358). Indeed the Russian Formalists held the opinion that all literature is defamiliarization. Shklovsky believed that defamiliarization could be found almost everywhere form is found. Defamiliarization is, therefore, all about those literary techniques and devices that make the familiar things seem unfamiliar. Chaudhuri employs all such literary techniques and devices that renews and refreshes our perceptions of the ordinary, familiar things and make them look strange and interesting. Defamiliarization is, therefore, about different perspectives, putting things on a cosmopolitan level, literary tropes such as irony, simile, metaphor, and various other techniques that tend to broaden our horizon of perception, renews our perception of the ordinary, commonplace things and make it look

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delightful and fascinating. To sum up, Defamiliarization is about creating magic out of the ordinary through various literary tropes and techniques.

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

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

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

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

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

Apart from visual imagery, the novelist has a fascination for sound and sound patterns. Indeed, the novelist possesses this unique gift of acute sense for sounds in great measures perhap due to his training as a classical musician. Music is an indispensable part of our lives and is found everywhere in nature, in humans, though we don't realize it as it becomes an automated process. It is the significant task of literature to make us aware and renew our perceptions of the familiar, ordinary, daily routine things of our lives. As there is a rhythm in our heart beat, therefore, the rhythm of music directly touches our hearts. When this rhythm of our heart beat is affected, our health is affected. Music is present in our expressions of celebrations, happiness, sadness, etc. Music could be said to be the sweet and soothing sounds that vibrate and create an immense aesthetic pleasure, feeling, and beauty that overcomes the sadness and sorrows of our lives. So music is recognized as one of the fine arts that brings permanent peace and solace to the human world. It is indeed man's expression of the deeper converse, with the innermost spirit, which is materialized through the medium of tones, tunes, and melodies. It can be said to be the language of man's deeper soul like literature. For example, the cries of a baby have certain rhythm,

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

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

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

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

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

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

Amit Chaudhuri is neither didactic nor has contempt for anything, but his disapproval towards certain things becomes apparent through his use of irony, satire, and humor, the other literary tropes that bring about the effect of defamiliarization. A few striking examples of such irony could be cited, for example, when the narrator and his friend, Sharma, were having a comfortable stroll in Oxford, the author says that they were "two Indians who might never have met in India, feeling at home…"(25). So, defamiliarization is produced when an author makes his readers perceive his work in a new light, removing the layer of automated perceptions. Such ironical touches are also a part of Chaudhuri's writings. Let us consider another example where the author puts forth his strong comments against people who seem to be devout Christians but can curse God at their own whims. He says, "There is a Church here, in Cowley, for they are devout Christians,…but blaspheming and cursing God when they feel like"(93). The author further puts it in the above context that these are the people who speak English that is hardly spoken in any other part of the world anymore, with "queer proverbs and turns, dropped consonants and vowels, and turn the language like meat inside their mouths"(93). He is conscious of the words, the accent, the language, be it English or Bengali. Thus language has always been a significant consideration for the novelist. A person speaking his mother tongue well but finding it inconvenient to command any fluency in a foreign language is something very natural and obvious. Since the novelist possesses a keen observation, so he has defamiliarized this familiar situation. Bengalis have a typical accent of putting stress on words, and they do

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this while speaking any language. The narrator amuses the readers by presenting the way his mother pronounces English words. The effect of defamiliarization becomes apparent when a Bengali person speaks English in a different accent. The narrator's remark regarding his mother's pronunciation of English becomes more gripping when he says that she belongs to a culture with a more spacious concept of time. The author puts it, "Like most Bengalis, she pronounces 'hurt' as 'heart', and 'ship' as 'sheep', for she belongs to a culture with a more spacious concept of time, which deliberately allows one to naively and clearly expand the vowels;…" (58).

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

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

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

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

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

Amit Chaudhuri is a great realist. In his works, he does not write about some great event or incident,

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hero or heroics, rather, he depicts just the small, ordinary details of everyday life of an individual like how he gets up in the morning, how he eats, takes a bath or drives an outdated, difficult-to-start car, and so on. To be precise, his creative focus falls on the humdrum, quotidian, familiar routine of life, but through the magic of his words and sublime language, he defamiliarizes the familiar, commonplace things of our life and makes it interesting by bringing the music and poetry from them. Well, it could be said that defamiliarization is all about the literary techniques and devices that are used to differentiate the literary language from the ordinary utterances apart from imparting an aesthetic quality to it. Therefore, we can say that Amit Chaudhuri's works have the beautiful effect of defamiliarization.

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