

A Critical Study of Consciousness of Amit Chaudhuri's Fictional Characters in the novel *Afternoon Raag* through

Patañjali's *Yoga Sutras*

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Abstract: The present research paper is an attempt to explore the nature of consciousness of Chaudhuri's fictional characters through Patañjali's *Yoga Sutras*. *Yoga Sūtras* explore human mind and how it can be trained, developed and, finally, transcended. Patañjali's work thus provides important tools to study the subjectivity of fictional characters. *Yoga Sūtras* offer useful insights into the workings of a mind and nature. A reading of Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* can offer fresh insights into the nature of mind, consciousness and self.

Key Words: Consciousness, Mind, Nature, Self, Subjectivity

Though the words *mind* and *consciousness* are frequently used, their exact definitions have never been easy. A reading of Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* can offer fresh insights into the nature of mind, consciousness and self. The present research paper is an attempt to explore the nature of consciousness of Chaudhuri's fictional characters through Patañjali's *Yoga Sutras*. *Yoga Sūtras* explore human mind and how it can be trained, developed and, finally, transcended. Patañjali's work thus provides important tools to study the subjectivity of fictional characters.

Yoga Sūtras have been translated and commented on by many scholars. The version which is used here is *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali* by Edwin F. Bryant. A study of *Yoga Sūtras* can provide new perspectives for evaluating Amit Chaudhuri's characters who are all engaged in some kind of struggle. They have certain desires, aims, aspirations, memories that result in suffering.

The paper is divided into two sections. The first section briefly discusses certain important aspects of Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras*, mainly the nature of mind and consciousness. The second part explores the consciousness of Chaudhuri's fictional characters in the novel *Afternoon Raag*.

For the faculty called "mind", Patañjali uses the term *chitta*. According to him, it is made of three components: *manas*, *buddhi* and *ahamkara*. *Manas* is considered that faculty which always receives different kind of impressions. These impressions could be gathered by our senses from the outside world. *Buddhi* is the discriminative faculty which classifies these impressions and reacts to them. The thing known as ego-sense is *Ahamkara*. It claims that whatever impressions we receive are individual knowledge. For example, *manas* reports: "A large animate object is quickly approaching." *Buddhi* decides: "That is a bull. It is angry." *Ahamkara* says: "It wants to attack me" (Byrant 12). The mind seems to be intelligent and conscious, but Patañjali holds that it is not, since it is material and a manifestation of *prakriti*. On the contrary, the *purusha* is considered to be pure consciousness by Patañjali. The mind merely reflects that consciousness and so it appears to be conscious.

Patañjali begins *Yoga Sūtras* by defining *yoga* as "*cittavritti nirodhah*": in other words, *yoga* is the practice of restraining the tendency of the mind to keep moving from object to object (3). *Cittavritti* denotes both the pattern of consciousness and the activity of the mind. The general tendency of ego-sense is to become involved with the object seen, to identify with it. The experiences of the ego-sense may be painful, painless or pleasurable. This false identification of the seer with the perceiving mind (as the ego-sense) is the cause of all our misery. Even the ego's temporary identification with happiness brings anxiety, a desire to cling to the object of happiness, and there is thus future possibility for unhappiness. Pure consciousness remains forever outside the mind's domain. A person can never know his or her real self as long as one's thought-waves and the ego-sense tend to be identical with oneself. Unless the mind is disciplined, it becomes involved with the objects experienced, producing unhappiness or the potential for unhappiness. It is hence, important to unlearn the false identification.

According to Patañjali, five different thought-patterns characterize ordinary mental states. These are termed as mental fluctuations or modifications (*vritti*) of consciousness. The five *vrittis* or fluctuations of the mind are *pramana* (valid cognition), *viparyaya* (misconception), *vikalpa* (imagination), *nidra*

(sleep) and *smriti* (memory). These are the five fields in which the mind operates and through which experience is gathered and stored. Our *chitta* (mind-stuff) misidentifies with these *vrittis*, act as colouring, distorting mediums.

What does cause the normal *vrittis* of the mind? How does a person remain chained to conditioned existence? Human suffering arises out of ordinary consciousness itself, Patañjali explains, where attachment to the forms of *prakriti* veils from us the knowledge of our reality, namely our nature as timeless *purusha*.

Patañjali in *Yoga Sutras* further considers five activities of mind (*kleshas* or source of affliction) that create these *vrittis* of ordinary consciousness. These are the root cause of the “misidentification with the modifications of the mind” (10). *Avidya* is the first *klesha*. It is the opposite of *vidya*, which means the ability to distinguish between the true and untrue. *Avidya* is the main cause of suffering. *Asmita* is the ego identity, which understands all reality in terms of itself. It forms a ‘self’ out of the physical body, memory and the wavering thoughts. This formation obscures the knowledge of true self. *Raga* (attachment) and *dvesa* (aversion) are the third and fourth *kleshas*. The ego identifies everything in these terms: either good for oneself (attachment), or bad for oneself (aversion). *Abhinivesa* is the fifth *klesha*. It is a strong attachment to the false self’s activity. More precisely, it is a clinging to the life of the ego.

As human beings we perceive this world through our mind. For example, if the mind is clouded with anger or agitation, the perception leads to pain and *dukha* (sorrow). The mind is clouded due to what Patañjali calls *klesas* or impurities.

Desires, emotions and aspirations are part of a person’s life. These disturb one’s peace. *Yoga Sūtras* try to explain these desires and the root cause of these desires. The psychological state of a person is described according the position of *chitta* (mind-stuff) which is normally in constant agitation. *Chitta* has a wonderful power of self-transformation, being always in a fluid, changing state. We, as human beings, are under the influence of the senses, memories, imagination, impulses and emotions. These cause disturbance. *Yoga Sūtras* help to understand the functioning of the mind and to still movements, leading one towards *samādhi*: the state of consciousness where the mind achieves identity with the object of its attention.

The central theme of *Yoga Sūtras* is to remove, transcend or set aside the obstacles that lead to false identities. We, as human beings, misidentify ourselves. Once the obstacles are removed, the true self naturally shines forth. When one discovers pure consciousness (*purusha*) separate from many false identities, the process of self-realization occurs.

The first part deals with different mental states causing afflictions, the fruit of action and their painful nature. It introduces us to the *kriya yoga* (action yoga). The eight limbs are also described which will be discussed further. It talks about the practice of *yoga* in 55 *sūtras*. *Vibhūti pada* shows the sadhaka the need to integrate the intelligence, ego and 'I' principle. It also discusses how *yoga* empowers the mind. Patañjali describes the three steps: concentration (*dhāranā*), meditation (*dhyāna*) and total absorption (*samādhi*) together called *saṁyama*. This may lead to self-realization.

It also discusses how *yoga* empowers the mind. Patañjali describes the three steps: concentration (*dhāranā*), meditation (*dhyāna*) and total absorption (*samādhi*) together called *saṁyama*. This may lead to self-realization. *Kaivalya pada* describes liberation or freedom of the mind resulting from *yoga*. It is the ultimate goal of *yoga*. Patañjali distinguishes *kaivalya* from *samādhi*. In *kaivalya*, he believes in a positive state of life, above the *tamasic*, *rajasic* and *sattvic* influences of the three *guṇās* of nature. In the end all parts come together to control your inner power and to attain a higher sense of life.

The first *pada* of *Yoga Sūtras* is called *samādhi pada*, which means meditative absorption. This part contains the definition of *yoga*: the control or restraint of the movement of consciousness, leading to their complete cessation. It does not mean any kind of contact between the individual self and some other reality like God or the Absolute. This part deals with the functioning of the mind and its *vṛttis*. *Yoga* is defined as restraint of *vṛttis* of consciousness which has three functions: cognition, conation or volition, and motion. It also describes the methods which help to still movements. These methods lead one towards *samādhi* which is the ultimate aim of *Yoga Sūtras*. It is the high state of perfect concentration or complete absorption of attention (1.3). Patañjali terms the uninterrupted flow of attention as the state of *samādhi*. In this state the outer attributes of the object of meditation are stripped away. It is called absorption. It is a state in which the object, observer and the process of observing all merge into one. There seems to be only the object in existence. Thus, *samādhi* is the state of one-pointedness or *nirodhah*. The *nirodhah*

mind is mastered, controlled, regulated and restrained (1.2). It does not mean the suppression of thoughts and emotions rather it is considered the mastery over the process of mind.

The false knowledge is termed as *viparyaya*. It is based on distortion of reality caused by misconception. This hinders the *sadhaka* in his efforts to experience the seer. *Vikalpa* is linguistic construction without any real object "... that which follows from the knowledge of words and does not refer to any real object i.e., something like the 'horned tiger' which cannot exist in reality but can only be conceived as a linguistic construct" (16). Memory is the unmodified recollection of words and experiences (17). It is the collection of the modulations and impressions of correct knowledge, perverse knowledge, illusory knowledge and sleep. As perception changes, memory too may alter, but correctly used, it enables us to recall experiences in their true, pristine state. This ability is the foundation of the practice of discrimination.

Patañjali states that one should get rid of these *vṛttis* with the help of *vairāgya* or feeling of renunciation and *abhyāsa*. It is a kind of evolution which helps us explore the self. This self exploration results in detachment from external objects. One achieves a tranquil state of mind. Similarly, *Kaivalya* can be attained with the effect of the twin disciplines of *abhyāsa* and *vairāgya*.

Patañjali discusses various stages of *samādhi*. These stages fall into two categories: *samprajñāta-samādhi* and *asamprajñāta-samādhi*. The first requirement is that the mind should get rid of the fluctuations of thought, *vṛttis*, discussed by Patañjali in *Yoga Sūtras*. Following is a brief discussion of the stages of *samādhi* collectively called *samprajñāta-samādhi*. Here the mind is not in a fluctuating mode.

1. Vitarka-samādhi. Patañjali introduces us to the first stage of *samādhi* in *Yoga Sūtras*. Here a physical object is the centre of meditation, such as the statue or physical image of a Hindu God. The physical object acts as support for the mind in order to hold its single-pointed focus. The person meditating is still connected to the material world. It is the first step of experience in *samādhi*, involving use of the five gross elements such as earth, water, fire, air and space.

2. Savitarka- samādhi. In this *samādhi*, an object is selected for meditation by a person. That object is coloured by mental images based on names or labels of the object that connotes some meaning to that

person who is meditating. These connotations are called *vikalpas*. We have some preconceived knowledge of the object which results in the undivided attention on the object.

3. Nirvitarka-samādhi. Here a person views the object without any preconceived notions or subconscious knowledge. The mind gets transformed into the object. The object is meditated free of any mental constructs. The object gets rid of all sense of time and space.

4. Vicara- samādhi. In this stage of *samādhi* the absorption is of more subtle nature. The person experiences the object in the form of its more subtle elements, the *tanmatras* or the *tattvas*, as well as *ahamkara* and *buddhi* (smell, taste, sight, touch, and sound). Going through the gross elements to the experience of the subtle elements of an object is the key to moving to deeper stages of *samādhi*. Patañjali says that the mind can become just like a transparent jewel, taking on the form of whatever object is before it. This means the mind can penetrate the very essence of the object of penetration (13). The subtlest layer of *prakriti* is consciousness, which can become pure when there is a complete cessation of the fluctuations of the mind.

5. Savicara-samādhi. In this kind of *samādhi* the person is bounded by space. He experiences the subtle aspects of the object as existing in present. When the object of meditation dissolves, the person starts experiencing subtle energy without any space or time context (16).

6. Nirvicara-samādhi. The person meditating loses the sense of time and space. Patañjali says that this truth –bearing wisdom produces a certain form of *samskara* that blocks the creation of new *samskara* or the effect of any latent *samskara* that have not already activated karma. These wisdom *samskaras* help the mediator to distinct between *purusha* and *prakriti* and allow him to make choices accordingly.

7. Ananda-samādhi. It refers to an experience of bliss arising during the meditation. The prevalence of *sattva guna* is required to reach this stage.

8. Asmita-samādhi. It refers to awareness penetrating all the way to *buddhi*, which is a part of the material world. In This stage *buddhi* turns away from any external objects and focuses on *purusha*. Here an individual's consciousness clearly understands his or her true nature as consciousness itself.

Patañjali also discusses practices to cut away the obstacles that block the light of the self within. Any wise person sees all worldly experiences as painful. These lead to anxiety and pain. It should be

avoided and discarded. The unity of the seer (the subject, or experience) with the seen (the object, or that which is experienced) is the cause or connection to be avoided. The chapter focuses on trying to connect with the pure essence of one's self. It enforces an attitude of restraint and an adjustment of oneself which is different from any kind of physical activities.

The self attains the final stage that is *kaivalya* or isolation, if one can bring an end to this state of association with objects, the sole cause. It is very important to break the link between the seer and the seen by shedding off the veil of ignorance. It is achieved through right knowledge. This is called as the stage of *kaivalya*, emancipation. "The association of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* brought about by the dispersion of *avidya* is the real remedy and that is the liberation of the seer (*The Science of Yoga* 44).

On the other hand, *samādhi* is a state in which the observer, object and the process of observing collapse into one. It is devoid of 'I'. Awareness of place vanishes in *samādhi*, and one ceases to experience space and time. The total absorption of the meditating consciousness on the form of the object, with such intensity as to forget its own existence, as it were, and to identify itself with the object with such force that it look as if the object itself is meditating. This is called *samādhi*. The condition of the body is not an indicator of what takes place in the realm of the mind. The mind is already disconnected from the body. In Sanskrit *samādhi* means the balancing of consciousness. The three together are called *saṁyama*. *Samyama* is constitutive of the three *aṅgas* i.e. *dhāranā*, *dhyāna*, and *samādhi*. It reflects the intermingling of mind, intelligence and consciousness. For example, Chaudhuri's first novel *A Strange and Sublime Address* captures Calcutta with its unique cultural character perceived through the eyes of the twelve-year-old protagonist Sandeep. The boy's perspective transforms an otherwise ordinary place. The character's mind becomes a locus, a site of impressions, thoughts and feelings. The impressions created on the child's consciousness reveal a very different Calcutta.

Consciousness has three characteristics; to wander, to be restrained and to remain silent. It is imperative that the silent state must be transformed into a single dynamic state of awareness.

Kaivalya pāda, the fourth section of the text, enumerates the means to attain *kaivalya*. Patañjali describes the path of enunciation, *vairāgya marga*, the path of detachment from worldly objects and of

freedom from worldly desires. Patañjali says that one who has disciplined his *chitta* remains unresponsive to likes and dislikes, and is filled with purity and tranquility. Sometimes, people seem to imagine that the literal meaning of *kaivalya* is a state of consciousness in which *purusa* is completely isolated from all other and lives in isolation. Such a state, if it did exist, would be a horror. The idea of isolation is to be understood in relation to *prakriti* from which *purusa* is isolated. The isolation frees him from all the limitations, which are inherent in being involved in matter in a state of *avidya*, but leads him, on the other hand, to the closest possible unification with consciousness or reality. The greater becomes the degree of our union with pure knowledge and awareness of oneness, the more we transcend matter and isolate our consciousness from it. Thus, *kaivalya* the final stage of *yoga*, “deals with dissociation of oneself from desire towards material objects as also a dissociative attempt in the means to cognition of these objects” (Yoga Sutras 110).

On the basis of the above, it can be asserted that the theoretical-critical possibilities afforded by Patañjali can be employed to interpret and analyze Amit Chaudhuri's characters.

The second section deals with the consciousness of Chaudhuri's characters in the novel *Afternoon Raag* (1993). It is a novel about arrivals, departures, new life, old memories, new world and old home. It delineates the experiences of a young Indian student of English Literature at the University of Oxford. The central but nameless character is caught in a complicated love triangle with Mandira and Shehnaz. Loneliness and melancholy trouble him. He has devoted his life to aesthetic pursuits. The novel is also a tribute to Indian classical music. Multiple emotions are evoked with the help of *rāgas*.

A study of *Yoga Sūtras* can provide new perspectives for evaluating Amit Chaudhuri's characters who are all engaged in some kind of struggle. They have certain desires, aims, aspirations, memories that result in suffering.

Most of Chaudhuri's characters have left their homeland. People tend to feel disturbed when they are alienated from their homeland. Displacement brings anxiety and unease and the memory of home produces a sense of homelessness.

Memory is one of the *vrttis*. Patañjali describes memory as the retention or, more literally, the not slipping away of an object of experience (44). An object experienced by a person forms an imprint in the mind. The attachment to the object results in pain upon the loss of the object.

Shehnaz is also in an agitated state. She had been married for a brief time, and then got a divorce. She is a lonely girl searching for the companionship:

She was, essentially, a lonely person searching for a right company, a wise little girl in a woman's body, dressed in black trousers, a blue top and a coat, and black sneakers.

(2)

The narrator and Shehnaz give each other company when it is needed. Later he begins to avoid her, but she cannot forget his love and warmth. The narrator had a liking for her, but he is fickle-minded. The memory of his affection gives her pain. According to Patañjali, memory is the recollection of 'unforgotten' experiences, both conscious and unconscious. It is a *vritti* (mental fluctuation), in which one remembers the past experiences. While doing so one is distracted from the present and enters into his own world of imagination. It can be both pleasant and painful.

Similarly, Mandira was once in love with the narrator. She is very popular among students as well as tutors. After breaking up with the narrator, she feels totally distraught. In her *mudha* state of mind (lacking any enthusiasm for work and life), she loses the ability to distinguish between right and wrong. Her mind is overpowered by emotions and is devoid of any rational judgment. She has started leading a secluded life away from the narrator and even discontinues her studies:

After a spell of depression, she decides to postpone her final by a year; in Trinity term, she moved out of the college, packed her things in two suitcases and left while her friends prepared for exams. She moved to a house in a blind lane off Cowley Road . . . Mandira then begins to live more or less alone, cut off from her old friends, her college routines, and her tutor, an old don in spectacles. (99-100)

Mandira feels cheated by the narrator and is not able to return to normal life: the narrator left her abruptly. At last, she decides to return to her family:

Mandira decides to go back to her parents and her, wisecracking sister, she will never mention it to them, and then she will get married. If she is married, she would like to have a baby in a year; it is something she has thought of, in a vague but intense way, for a long time. She will begin another life. (123-124)

The relation of the narrator with Shehnaz and Mandira is charged with the feelings of suppressed anxiety and loneliness. So much so that “Oxford seems to be a dream one is about to remember... that one has no existence for oneself, except in their absence” (67). Chaudhuri tries to recreate the state of mind of young people trying to come in terms with loneliness, alienation and nostalgia in their unique way. Devika Bose in “The Novels of Amit Chaudhuri: Stories without Beginnings, Middle or Ends” notes “past memories, and present impressions, are all mixed together like a mingling of different musical notes” (103).

We get a detailed description of the protagonist’s mother in the fourth chapter of *Afternoon Raag*. She is suffering from chronic constipation. She wanted to learn classical music so she had hired a guruji and a tabla player. Her unfulfilled dream has led to her deteriorating condition. It is very important to get rid of one’s past to lead a peaceful life in present.

The narrator’s parents moved to in the suburbs of Bombay when he was in Oxford. The flat was a tidy one. When the narrator’s father worked in a company, they used to live in a bigger flat.

The people, the narrator observes, “who really belonged to our lane were those who were on its margins – servants, sweepers, watchmen, hawkers of and fish who sent their cries out to the balconies and went with their baskets from door to door, even the beggars who, like the tradesmen, worked on a repeated route within a definite area.” (240).

Memory is one of the *klesha*. Past memories and incidents always lead to pain and suffering. The narrator becomes nostalgic about his childhood. He remembers the birth place of his parents and feels painful because he is not able to come to terms with his present. The novel is divided into two phases: The narrator’s family and the years spent in Bombay and Calcutta, and his student-life in Oxford. Here, too, the birthplace comes across as a dominant motif of pain and suffering:

Calcutta is my birth place. It is the only city I know that is timeless, where change is naturalized by the old flowing patterns, and the anxiety caused by the passing of time is replaced by fatigue and surrender. It is where my father, having left Sylhet, came as a student fifty years ago. These were the last years before independence; and my father lived in a hostel in North Calcutta. (243)

The narrator describes the upper-class life-style of his parents while remembering his parents. He is reminded of everything even the two servant girls Chhaya and Maya. He remembers his parents with their individual identities. The portrait of Chitrakaki is both humorous and full of pity for the fact that she is now no more. She is remembered for her taste of new and different cuisines. She used to love exploring the tastes of different regions. Food should not be taken on the face value. It is centrally placed in a given culture. It stirs up your memories. Here is a description of the 'paper dosa':

They are large white cylinders made of rice paste; from a distance, they look like rolled-up rugs, and coming closer, they resemble ridiculous hairdresses of vast importance; from table to table, the waiters bore them glumly, as if they were gifts. (213)

Thus, the present paper sums up offers a potential perspective on the nature of human consciousness. As discussed above, it provides us direct insight into the internal processes of Chaudhuri's characters. As far as the authorial consciousness is concerned, a writer must step back and look at the subject in perspective, dispassionately. Although Chaudhuri's characters are grounded in his own experiences but he probes them sincerely. He, by the power of imagination, tries to live inside his characters and lets them live their reality.

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