

Nirad C. Chaudhuri's *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* : An Abiding Sense of Dislocation

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Abstract

One of the finest memoirs written in the 20th Century, Nirad C Chaudhuri's *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951) is considered to be a 20th century classic. The memoir is the story of a sensitive man's struggle to attain maturity in the early decades of the 20th century. This study aims to understand the idiosyncrasies of an anglophile Brown Sahib, who created a huge controversy by dedicating his memoir, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, to the memory of the British Empire in India. The paper intends to explore Chaudhuri's abiding sense of dislocation, which eventually became a hallmark of his psyche and persona.

Key Terms : memoirs, anglophile, idiosyncrasies, abiding, dislocation.

Introduction

Counted as one of the great books published in the 20th century, Nirad C Chaudhuri's *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* is a recollection of his own childhood and adolescence days spent in the rural environs of Kishorganj, Banagram and Kalikutch of East Bengal, and later in the cosmopolitan Calcutta, the high seat of the mighty British Empire. *The Autobiography*, which covers a period ranging from 1897 to 1921, is the lyrical reminiscence of Chaudhuri's homeland in the East Bengal he left at an early age. It was during his childhood and adolescence, Chaudhuri cultivated a fondness for the aristocracy, and the vanishing charm of the empire. Over the years Chaudhuri established himself as a writer of the first rank and ---- and a raging defender of the vanished civilization of the Bengal Hindu aristocracy into which he was born (Kaufman, 1999).

The dedication of the book to the memory of the British Empire is a heartfelt lament of a sensitive Bengali *Bhadralok* on the vanquishing of the empire which had ruled the whole world and particularly Bengal along with his mind and heart. In the pages of the memoir Chaudhuri drew upon his personal experiences as he chronicled the transformation of India from a British colony to an independent state (Kaufman, 1999). Some people, though, celebrated Chaudhuri's *Autobiography*, yet others called him a pseudo-sociologist, an anglophile, a charlatan, a dog, a frustrated man, a tool of Empire, a sexually repressed Victorian, a self-hating Indian, a mediocre stylist and a failed scholar (Almond, 2015).

The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian is Chaudhuri's "panoramic picture of the Bengali sensibility", (Chaudhuri, 2008) and the beliefs and practices of the late 19th and early 20th century Bengal. The description of Kishorganj, Banagram and Kalikutch complete the story of his boyhood, family antecedents, and its cultural milieu. No any book, so far, has described the landscape of East Bengal, the way Nirad Chaudhuri has done. The *Autobiography* portrays a wonderful account of facts, tales, myths and superstitions about Bengal in the beginning of the 20th century. The book also chronicles an account of the growing up of a man in the mid-20th century India, from the dynamics of a family life in rural villages to the political dynamics during the time of Gandhi. The book revolves around the author's young life and how his surroundings influenced his views and thoughts (shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in>jspui>bitstream).

Born in 1897, in a small town of East Bengal, Chaudhuri's background was modest and provincial (Almond, 2015). The earliest part of his life was spent in a rural, village setting. In affectionate and sensuous detail (wikivisually.com /wiki/NiradC.Chaudhuri), Chaudhuri describes the typical 19th century Victorian Bengali set up of palm trees, village ponds, rice fields, people dotted paths, stretching out to the horizon (Jack, 2001). For his high school and university education, Chaudhuri moved to Calcutta and joined Scottish Church College, and stood first in the list of successful students in BA Honors examination. Yet, he failed to attain his Master's degree, and thereafter, moved to pursue a career in journalism. It was during his days spent in Calcutta, Chaudhuri developed friendship with the famous Bengali poets and writers of the time : the poet Mohitlal Majumdar, the writer and journalist Pramatha Chaudhuri and the gifted fiction writer Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay. Before shifting his base to Delhi at the age of forty five, Chaudhuri remained in Calcutta editing several famous magazines and contributing to many more on regular basis (Almond, 2015).

Publication and its Effect

Chaudhuri began writing his memoir in Delhi, during the turbulent years of Indian partition. Chaudhuri was in mid-fifties, when the book was first published in 1951 by Macmillan, London. Immediately thereafter, Chaudhuri received international fame and recognition, he felt, had been long due to him. However, the dedication of his memoir to the memory of the British Empire made him a subject of hatred at a time when Indians were busy in celebrating the independence of the country. Yet, Chaudhuri's international critics, particularly from a post war British audience, were eager to learn about the massacre of partition as a consequence of decolonization, widely acclaimed the book. A couple of years later, most notably after *the Continent of Circe*, an increasingly hostile environment got created against Chaudhuri, culminating in his decision, at the age of seventy three to leave India and permanently relocate to Oxford (Almond, 2015).

Chaudhuri's Relationship with England

Right from his early age, England, which occupied a major part of his mental make-up, remained a living presence in Chaudhuri's imagination. It was an enlightened childhood during which he was exposed to a variety of objects such as English poetry, English landscape and the paintings of Raphael. Chaudhuri was fascinated by the vitality and pragmatism of the English character shown in English art and poetry (Jack : 2001). The memoir brought out a strange contrast in the mental make-up of Chaudhuri who fell in love with the Bengali countryside, and yet looked at England for intellectual regeneration.

Chaudhuri's Place in the Indian English Literature

Chaudhuri was one of the few Indian writers who shot into fame during the years after Indian independence. Unlike R K Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao, who maintained profound admiration for Gandhi, Chaudhuri deviated himself away from Gandhi and his philosophy, and did not maintain the so called adulation towards Gandhi and his non-violence. Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo represented the early period of Indian renaissance, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R K Narayan in fiction, and Jawaharlal Nehru and Nirad Chaudhuri in non-fiction represented the later period (Almond, 2015). The publication of Chaudhuri's *Autobiography* "was seen as a landmark in the rebirth of Indian writing in English" (Mukherjee : 1997). Though Chaudhuri hated to be called an Indian author, yet, his place in the modern Indian English literature is assured (https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/18287/7/07_chapter%201.pdf).

Chaudhuri, though lived his life in penury and hardship, is one of the rare intellectuals who dedicated himself to the relentless pursuit of knowledge. With exceptional courage, Chaudhuri made intellectual writing his main vocation. With his sheer determination, will power and hard work, Chaudhuri established himself as a significant writer belonging to the international community. What lies underneath the memoir is the ramification of Indo-British encounter and the loss of the glory and grandeur of Bengal especially after the rise of Gandhian politics in India

The Bengal Renaissance

The Bengal Renaissance, a period of time stretching from the early nineteenth century to the early decades of the 20th century (Almond, 2015), was an extended phase of western influence upon the culture and society of Bengal. This was the time in which European, Hindu and Islamic ideas intermingled with one another and produced a wave of synthesis of ideas and awakening. As a result, Bengal became the torchbearer in each and every field of knowledge, culture and society. Chaudhuri was born in the closing years of this period, and its towering figures had a profound influence upon him. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's concept of Hindu nationalism, Rammohun Roy's stand as a reformer of English misrepresentation in India, and the poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt's classical propensities were the huge influences in building Chaudhuri's astonishing erudition. And finally Tagore, the grand old man of Bengali letters, whom Chaudhuri called a public figure outcaste by the Bengal he was devoted to, underlines the deeply ambivalent feelings of the author (Almond, 2015). According to David Lelyveld, Chaudhuri saw himself as the last survivor of the so-called Bengal Renaissance, the vital and creative cultural movement that was initiated by Ram Mohan Roy, and that came to an end with the death of Rabindranath Tagore in 1941" (Lelyveld, 1988).

Renaissance Humanism, a product of the intellectual awakening of the 19th Century Bengal Renaissance, had its focus on 'humanism, liberalism, individualism and democratic tendencies'. The movement initiated magnificent outburst of creativity in literary activity (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bengali_Renaissance).

The Bengal renaissance began with the arrival of the poetry of Michael Madhusudan Dutt, the new kind of drama written by Dinbandhu Mitra and the patriotic novels of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. The intellectual, moral and spiritual awakening had its widespread and far reaching impact on the aristocratic and middleclass section of the contemporary Bengali society (Das, 2001). The concept of Bengali *Bhadralok* was the product of the 19th century literary and creative urge. By virtue of being born and brought up in that particular age, Chaudhuri imbibed the true spirit of renaissance, and his writing is a testimony to the impact of that great age of awakening (https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/60540/5/05_chapter%201.pdf).

Dislocation and Alienation

Chaudhuri who had moved from Kishorganj in East Bengal, a municipal town to the cosmopolitan Calcutta, was, in fact, a provincial intellectual moving in an environment he didn't belong to. In the *Autobiography*, Chaudhuri has detailed the kind of attitude, the people of Calcutta maintained towards the people of East Bengal. The point helps to illuminate 'the abiding sense of dislocation' – both intellectual as well as geographical – he would feel throughout his life (Almond, 2015). "After leaving his birthplace Kishorganj, he could never adjust himself to the urban environment of Calcutta. A feeling of estrangement was always there at the back of his mind. The sense of open heartedness which he had experienced in East Bengal seemed to be absent in Calcutta. Hence, his displacement from East Bengal made him belong to geographically nowhere other than his reconstructed and imaginary timeless England (Chowdhury, 2015). Though Nirad Chaudhuri spent a large part of his life in Calcutta, he couldn't find a place among the contemporary intellectuals of Calcutta. The alienation created a sense of permanent dislocation. In consequence, he developed a sense of aggression and provocative notion of self. A strong feeling of alienation and dislocation became a hallmark of his personality, and it got a powerful reflection in his writings. Chaudhuri's *Autobiography* can be taken as an account of a painful uprooting to the city of Calcutta; in the end, the hero is cast adrift in tragic isolation" (Lelyveld, 1988).

Conclusion

An astonishing work of self-discovery, 'Nirad Chaudhuri's *The Autobiography* unfolds chronologically the personal history of a young man of scholarly taste and temperament (Munos, 2012). By linking the account of his personal life to the evolution of Indian history, the narrative remains a fascinating account of British imperialism and its impact on the Indian society and culture. 'An erudite scholar' (Verghese, 1973), Chaudhuri, 'a Brahmo Liberal at heart' (Shils, 1988), incessantly highlighted the hypocrisy of his own society, which, eventually, accelerated his feelings of alienation and dislocation. Nevertheless, *The Autobiography* remains a documentary evidence of the anglophile Chaudhuri's passionate relationship with England and the British Empire.

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