

A STRANGE AND SUBLIME ADDRESS

Amit Chaudhuri

A Strange and Sublime Address by Amit Chaudhuri (1991)

Story

This debut and semi-autobiographical novel by Amit Chaudhuri tells the story of a young boy in Calcutta, with episodes from his later life there, as well. Ten-year old Sandeep, an only child, lives with his Bengali parents in a Bombay high-rise. They make two summer visits to see relatives (mostly his uncle's family) in Calcutta, where Sandeep observes in detail his family, the physical space of the city and the behaviour of its inhabitants. Sandeep then goes to university in England and returns to India, where his family have shifted back to Calcutta. This shift in setting coincides with a shift in point of view, as the story is now told in the first person by Sandeep as a young man. The plot is slight, little more than a series of incidents in Sandeep's life and his family's life—his uncle dies of a heart attack, he meets a girl, one of his cousins is sent home from school—but the strength of the story lies in the young boy's perception of these otherwise unremarkable events. In the end, we feel we have been to the places so painstakingly described in the book and that we have taken inside the lives of these ordinary people.

Themes

Imagination The main theme of the novel is a celebration of a young boy's imagination. When he listens to his uncle talk about his business affairs in the city, Sandeep turns into a 'a myth or a fairy tale, full of evocative characters that worked themselves slowly into his imagination.' Similarly, when he watches his aunt enter a room (out of bounds to him) to do a ritual, he thinks 'prayer time is like play time, when adults become children again...when they were released from the irksome responsibility of the world.' Again, when Sandeep sits on the balcony and watches people in the street, he sees them as characters 'in their own dramas, acting out episodes for him.'

Nostalgia The undisguised autobiographical quality of this novel is evident throughout in its plaintive recollection of the 'good old days.' For example, when Sandeep's uncle's car breaks down once again, his aunt laments: 'Better perhaps to go back to the horse and horse carriage. On bad days like this, when the fans stopped turning because of power-cut, when the telephone went dead because of a cable-fault when the taps became dry because there was no power to pump the water...it seemed a better idea to return to a primitive, unpretentious means of subsistence -to buy a horse and a plough, to dig a well in one's backyard, to plant one's own trees and grow one's fruit and vegetables.'

Middle-class aspirations Related to this nostalgia is a gentle satire of middle-class Bengali (though universal) aspirations to 'get ahead in the world,' or (in the words of a popular sit-com on UK television) 'keeping up with the Kumars.' A good illustration of this is the comic scene when Sandeep's uncle struggles to get his car going in the morning. 'He [the uncle] was sitting at steering wheel of the old Ambassador, one arm casually hanging outside, one arm on the wheel ...The boys took position, like a small battalion -two by the window, two at the back, and another reserve, who would do the indispensable work of shouting from the rear. At his uncle's words, the team strained forward and the recalcitrant car, after some stolid silent thought, decided to concede a few feet into the road. 'Harder boys, harder!' persuaded his uncle. He looked almost heroic and serene, in complete control of the troubled situation.' Another good illustration of poking fun at middle-class aspirations is this: 'Fathers prayed their sons would be successes No effort would be spared, "future" and "career" had become Bengali words, incorporated unconsciously but feverishly into Bengali parlance. Meanwhile, children, like Egyptian slaves, dragged huge blocks of frustrating study all day to build that impressive but non-existent pyramid of success.'

Characters

Sandeep Ten-year-old Sandeep is the figure through whose eyes we experience most of this novel. He is an ordinary Bengali boy with an ordinary imagination, which the author manages to convince us is extraordinary. He is observant, mischievous, inquisitive and lovable.

Chottamama Chottamama is Sandeep's uncle, who lives in Calcutta and in whose house Sandeep spends his summer holidays visiting with his family. The uncle is a semi-comic figure, a failed businessman whose main desire is fulfilled when he buys a car that consistently breaks down. He is a kind and likable man who sings Bengali devotional songs in the bath.

Mamima Sandeep's aunt, Mamima, is a character who feels secure in her recollections of the past and in the traditional world of Hinduism. She performs rituals to the many gods and goddesses of Hindu mythology in a special room, forbidden to children. She thus becomes an object of mystery to the young Sandeep.

Calcutta Next to Sandeep, the most important character in this slight novel is the city of Calcutta. The author describes its various moods and qualities with precision and empathy, but he settles on one specific trait: it is a city of dust and decay. 'If one walks down the street, one sees mounds of dust-like sand-dunes on the pavements...The old houses, with their reposeful walls, are crumbling to slow dust; their once gleaming gates are rusting. Dust flakes off the ceilings in offices; the buildings are becoming dust, the roads are becoming dust...Daily, Calcutta disintegrates, unwhispering, into dust.'

MAJOR CHARACTERS

SANDEEP (Imaginative)

Character The young boy Sandeep is an only child but he enriches his world by his imagination and observation. He is alert to sights and sounds, he is curious about why people act and he notices the clothes that they wear. He is vaguely amused by his aunt's constant performance of rituals and by his uncle's unsuccessful attempts to make a living. He is precocious

Activities Sandeep spends most of his time watching others, his parents, his relatives, his neighbours and people in the street. He also likes to play with his two cousins and to follow his mother and aunt around during their daily routine. Although he goes to school, we don't hear much about those boring hours, except in his humorous characterisations of his teachers.

Illustrative moments

Imaginative Sandeep's imagination has the power to transform the mundane into the mysterious, the familiar into the 'strange and sublime.' A good illustration of this occurs early on in the novel when the author explains why Sandeep listened so intently to his uncle's recounting of his day, which would not interest many ten-year-old boys. 'He [Sandeep] liked listening to his uncle about business. He liked it because his uncle's account of the small business world always seemed like a suspense story or cheats, sophisticated two-timers, astringent moralists, clever strategists, heroic fighters, risk-takers and explorers. Each new business venture sounded like a new military onslaught, each new product like a never-before weapon capable of conquering the world added to a nameless arsenal.'

Observant Allied to this ability to turn the everyday into a mystery is his keen powers of observation. This is how the author describes Sandeep's perception of the street where his uncle's house stood: 'Even at night, the streets were theatres full of actors and extras, reckless dogs, insufferable cows lying in the centre of the lane, families arguing, old women gossiping, children chasing cats, rickshaw-wallahs idling.'

Sense of humour Imagination and observation come together in Sandeep's sense of humour, which runs underneath much of his descriptions of his family and of Calcutta. The best illustration of this gentle satire occurs when he describes his uncle's daily, chaotic departure for work: 'He [his uncle] would become an archetype of that familiar figure who is not often described in literature -the ordinary breadwinner in his moment of unlikely glory, transformed into the centre of his universe and his home. Over and over again, he would shout, "I am late!" in the classic manner of the man crying "Fire" or "Timber" or "Eureka!" while Saraswati [his mother] and Mamima [his aunt] scuttled around him like frightened birds.'

CHHOTOMAMA (Easy-going)

Character Chhotomama ('little/younger maternal uncle') is the uncle of Sandeep, the main character in the novel. Chhotomama is a sympathetic if somewhat buffoonish character, who never quite succeeds at anything, except to finish singing devotional songs in the bathtub. He is, like his wife, a provincial yet educated middle-class Bengali living in the bustling city of Calcutta. His tastes are distinctly Bengali in food (and the author goes to some lengths to describe his favourite dishes and their specifically Bengali flavours), in literature (Tagore is the 'best in the world') and in politics. He shares some of his nephew's powers of the imagination and is constantly reinventing his past, as a communist revolutionary, as a great ladies man and so on. 'When the revolution failed to come around, he had begun to believe he was a businessman.' He is also a little comic in his daily activities, especially in the morning when his clumsiness disturbs everyone and his noisy departure to work is a nuisance. He seems to lack a core, a set of beliefs or principle, and blows with the wind. 'Whenever he had doubts, his friends convinced him not to have any, and he agreed with the air of someone who enjoys being convinced.' When he suffers a heart attack and lies dying in a hospital bed, his family and friends gather around and talk about the weather, cricket and family affairs, without much of a glance at the old man prone in front of them. He is a lovable person but not someone of consequence.

Activities Chhotomama likes to talk about himself, to eat, to sing in the bath and to drive his car. The first three of these activities he performs admirably well, but not the last. Almost every morning he fumes and fumes at the malfunctioning car. He also likes to take long walks through the city (allowing the author to describe it minute detail), and especially on the *maidan*, a large open green space in the centre. At home in the evening, he reads the newspaper and listens to the radio.

Illustrative moments

Buffoon We see the inherently comic nature of Chhotomama's character in his daily habits, and particularly in his morning departure for work. In a scene that occurs early on, Sandeep comments on his uncle's behaviour, comparing his screams of 'I'm late! I'm late' to a man yelling 'fire!' in a burning building. He stumbles forward, stuffing his shirt into his trousers, forgetting and finding his belt, grabbing his tiffin carrier (lunch box) and getting frustrated when he can't tie his shoe laces properly. He crashes out of the house, to everyone's relief, but then returns with the news that his beloved automobile won't start.

Bengali pride A good illustration of Chhotomama's excessive pride in his Bengali identity occurs midway through the novel. He comes across his nephew and other boys playing a pretend game of 'freedom fighters' whose efforts brought about Indian independence in 1947. The uncle is intrigued as he watches the boys play their roles, but then he becomes angry when he realises that Sandeep, his nephew, has chosen to play the part of Gandhi. The uncle then tells him that he should have chosen the role of Subhas Chandra Bose, a Bengali patriot (who controversially made overtures to Hitler and Hirohito to defeat the British and liberate India that way).

Relaxed Perhaps the most sympathetic quality in Chhotomama's character is his serenity. Except for his chaotic morning departure, he is a relaxed man, reading, listening to the radio or going for a walk. We get a picture of this one evening in his house in Calcutta. 'He [Chhotomama] turned on the radio which began to babble like a village idiot, trying to sell biscuits and motor bikes. Smiling, he lay back on his bed, as secure as a soldier in his trench, with the newspaper in his hand. He folded it several ways and made it crackle. His face and his arms drowned in the black and white ocean of the newspaper, surfacing intermittently. Sighing regretfully, he fell asleep, the newspaper covering his face. When the breath came up from his nostrils, the paper rose and fell lightly, as if it were breathing as well.'

MAMIMA (Nostalgic)

Character Mamima is the aunt of Sandeep, the main character of this novel. She is seen mainly through the ten-year-old eyes of her nephew when he visits Calcutta on summer holidays, which lends a certain layer of distortion to her portrait. She lives, with her husband, Sandeep's uncle, in a large, rambling house in the centre of Calcutta. When we first meet her, she is described like this: she 'stood at the head of the stairs, in a place that was half sunlit and half shadowy, with immaculate serenity, seeming not to have moved from where she had said good-bye to him a year ago.' She is portrayed as a kind lady, who was always careful with her household routine, always attentive to her husband and children and nephew. As such, she is the embodiment of the traditional Hindu wife and

mother, or at least appears to be from the child's perspective. She is also very particular about observing the many household rituals of the Hindu calendar.

Activities Mamima is often involved in religious activities, beginning in the morning, when she would first take a bath, put on a sari and then enter the special room set aside for worship, called the *puja* room. Inside, she would light incense sticks, offer fruit to the gods and then say her prayers. After her morning prayers, she spends time with household chores, cooking, washing, ironing and cleaning, even though she has a servant to help her. She sometimes rubs mustard oil on her children's dripping bodies after a bath. She also sleeps a lot in the afternoons, sometimes with Sandeep's mother, on a large bed with all the curtains drawn.

Illustrative moments

Nostalgic Born in the early twentieth century, Mamima is in her seventies during the novel and has seen many changes in her lifetime, including two world wars, Independence and Partition, plus the modernisation of Indian economy and globalisation of society. Looking back, across the years, she is nostalgic for the old truths she once knew. A good example of her reminiscing comes in a comic scene one morning when her husband tries to start his beloved Chevrolet to motor off to his office. When it breaks down, not for the first time, Mamima reflects: 'Better perhaps to go back to the horse and horse carriage. On bad days like this, when the fans stopped turning because of a power-cut, when the telephone went dead because of a cable-fault, when the taps became dry because there was no power to pump the water, and when the car engine refused to start, she thought it seemed a better idea to return to a primitive, unpretentious means of subsistence—to buy a horse and a plough, to dig a well in one's backyard, to plant one's own trees and grow one's fruit and vegetables...in time people would forget that electricity had ever existed, and earthen lamps would burn again in the houses.' These reflections of the past are even more poignant because they crisscross with young Sandeep's dreams of the future.

Candid Although Mamima is often lost in the mists of time, or escapes into Hindu mythology, she is a no-nonsense person, very efficient, disciplined and candid. Her honesty seems to be a reflection of her lack of pretension and her attention to detail. A fine illustration of her candour is found in one of the many conversations that she has with Sandeep, her young nephew. One afternoon, the two of them are sitting half-asleep on a sofa, when Sandeep nudges his aunt and asks her about her marriage. She is still groggy, but the little boy persists, and she eventually tells him. 'I was married here in Calcutta. Your uncle came in a car. He was wearing a white dhoti [sarong-like garment] and a silk panjabi [coat] with gold buttons, and a topor [conical turban worn by a groom] on his head. Of course, I didn't see him till later.' 'Had you ever seen him before?' 'Only in a photograph.' 'Did you like him?' 'Not a bit.' Sandeep frowns when he hears this admission because it is at odds with the affectionate relationship he sees between his aunt and uncle. But Mamima smiles at him and reassures him that love is not like a photograph, not a momentary flash, but like a loaf of bread that must be kneaded and kneaded before it is cooked.