

***A Strange and Sublime Address* (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.

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.'

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.'