

Chhotomama (in Chaudhuri's novel *A Strange and Sublime Address*) 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.'