

History, Self-Alienation and A Study of Cultures: Studying Nirad C. Chaudhuri's *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*

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Abstract

The literary creations of Nirad C. Chaudhuri have often rendered him to be an anti-Indian, pro-British individual and a writer as atavistic as was India during the nineteenth century when literary London often considered the writers from the colonies as 'exotic outsiders, solitary figures and objects of curiosity' (Ranasinha 68). These authors were considered to be able to communicate the intricacies of their native culture, embody newness, and possessed the entelechy to describe the colonies as well as the British from an exotic perspective. This essay studies Nirad C. Chaudhuri's attempt to write history through an autobiographical mode in his *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* establishing his views and position detached from his countrymen, and thereby express his views regarding the West and the East from a self-detached point of view.

Key words: History, Indian, British, West – East, Alienation, Emancipation.

Introduction

The literary creations of Nirad C. Chaudhuri have often rendered him to be an anti-Indian, pro-British individual and a writer as atavistic as was India during the nineteenth century when literary London often considered the writers from the colonies as 'exotic outsiders, solitary figures and objects of curiosity' (Ranasinha 68). These authors were considered to be able to communicate the intricacies of their native culture, embody newness, and possess the entelechy to describe the colonies as well as the British from an exotic perspective. However, different writers from the colonies interrogated this preconceived dominant cultural assumption in their own manner to facilitate the process of an aesthetic translation. Nirad C. Chaudhuri published his memoir, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951) with Macmillan while he was working as a commentator of All India Radio in New Delhi. Though critics have critiqued him for several justifiable disturbing elements in his work, there are certain tendencies like his evoking the sense of place, his humour, his independence of judgement in the teeth of opposition and his phenomenal ability to keep working which are commendable. As one of his best known books, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* embodies an impassioned detail description of 'the conditions in which an Indian grew to manhood in the early decades of the twentieth

century' (*The Autobiography* Preface). Eunice de Souza is of the opinion that Chaudhuri's *The Autobiography* is 'more of an exercise in descriptive ethnology than an autobiography' ("Nirad C. Chaudhuri" 209). Chaudhuri details the four environments which had an important impact upon his life: Kishorganj, his birthplace and where he lived till he was twelve, Bangram, his ancestral village, Kalikutch, his mother's village and the England of his imagination. There are also references to Calcutta, the Indian Renaissance, the beginning of the nationalist movement, the author's experience of the colonial English arrogance in India which are all presented in contrast to the idyllic constructions of civilization as 'the greatest civilization on earth' ("Interview" 7). The author's opinion regarding history, politics and culture that binds a civilisation are all based on certain thematic constructions which seem to pervade his work. In this context we have to remember that Chaudhuri had not visited Britain till he was 57, when he came with the sponsorship of the BBC. He moved to Britain at the age of 73 and settled in Oxford for the rest of his life with his wife. Besides *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, the second volume of his autobiography, *Thy Hand, Great Anarch! India: 1921 – 57* (1987) is a historical document of his life as a student in Calcutta and as a secretary to the Congress leader, Sarat Chandra Bose. Writing an autobiography is a literary endeavour whose national significance bears witness to contemporary history. As such, Babur's *Autobiography*, Jahangir's *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, Mahatma Gandhi's *My Experiments with Truth*, Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography*, Rabindranath Tagore's *My Boyhood Days* and Rathindranath Tagore's *On the Edges of Time* to name a few works whose 'retrospective prose [facilitated towards] the development of [author's] personality' (Lejeune 202). Nirad C. Chaudhuri's personal history and experiences have also been documented in his books on Indian culture and national history, worth mentioning in this context, as they are a witness to and account of the decline of Bengal, which he considered

as matched by the failure of British imperialists to bequeath a lasting cultural legacy in India (Ranasinha 71).

This has enabled him to assert his autonomy and disinterest from his milieu, as autobiography is associated with the idea of the potency of self-identity and separate selfhood (McClintock 313), and it further facilitates the possibility of self-creation, masking the agency of cultural institutions at work in the life history that determines our stories and our selves (*On Autobiography* 192).

History through an Autobiographical Vein

'The creative clash of two civilisations' (Walsh 52), *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* tells the story of the early period of Nirad C. Chaudhuri's life and documents the condition 'in which an Indian grew into manhood in the early decades of this century' (*The Autobiography* Preface). Though Chaudhuri's presentation and interpretation of the

history of India establishes his critical insight in association with his subjective approach to the problems of Indian history, society, politics and culture, yet his self-Westernization remained static and lifeless throughout his long career. It is due to his self-Westernization that his sharp and merciless views of post-Independent India in *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, and his hallowing of the ‘Timeless England’ in *A Passage to England* were received with favour in Britain, however in due time by associating to the ‘obsolete notions of ‘Englishness’ and subscribing to largely discredited imperial ideas’ (Ranasinha 72), Chaudhuri progressively subscribed to a system of prolepsis. *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* is an Indian’s self portrait, mirroring the tortured assertiveness of a scholarly spirit who embraced in his life a uniquely extreme dislocation. *The Autobiography* embodies the perspectives of the author along with the truth to the text, facilitating a direct access to a clearly visible self – ‘an intention to honour the signature’ (Lejeune 202) by being true to his experiences and their respective honest documentation in his *The Autobiography*.

Verdict on the British and the Indians

The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian presents us coherent and imaginative portrayal of India’s history since all the chapters focus on social and cultural perspectives. Chaudhuri believes that it is the ‘unity in diversity’ of India that has urged the British to consider the Indians with an attitude of esteem and honour. Indian civilization is a history of past achievements along with a single community in spite of being ‘endowed with multi-racial and multi-lingual culture’ as the author puts it, ‘...the same species as the Homo sapiens historicas of Europe’ (*The Autobiography* 442). Chaudhuri’s real purpose is to document history through the autobiographical exercise solely as an avenue to get the history inaugurated. Since his early college days he was fascinated with history (Iyengar 591). *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* has defied all the vignettes of biography, only to be ‘the story of one’s life written by one’s self’ (Mulgan 27). Chaudhuri’s aim is neither to depict an autobiographical document, nor to reveal on the surface the various facets of his own self. The book is the author’s verdict on the British Raj as well as a virulent attack of the Indians practising poor mimicry of the notion of Western materialistic culture whom Bhabha has described as ‘mimic men’ and established by Naipaul in his novels. Historical in motive, Chaudhuri points, ‘My intention is thus historical...the book may be considered as a contribution to contemporary history’ (*The Autobiography* Preface). Clash between the cultures of the natives and the foreigners took place at mundane levels of existence. Chaudhuri brings in the reference to the incident of 1916, stating how the boys of the matriculation class bowed down to the locomotives as if they were Gods. His interaction with the West was chiefly concerned with the spiritual realm of existence, ‘My westernization is of the older pattern, concerned more with the mind than the material things’ (Swain 80). In spite of the impact of the West upon him, the

occidental influences upon his psyche were expressed through his consciousness and were manifested through 'culture'. Chaudhuri is of the opinion that the British Empire conferred subjecthood (*The Autobiography* 171) on us at the same time it withheld citizenship (Fanon 38), and the cultural contact was psychologically and imaginatively experienced by him. In Chapter IV of Book I, the author with a perceptive eye has presented the spirit of England as a place agitating the birth of a space out of the mytho-geography from books read and pictures seen and circulated. In his accounts England has been conjured up as one of the shaping forces of his life (Sharma 1066). Chaudhuri states, 'the chiaroscuro of our knowledge of England was extremely sensational' (*The Autobiography* 101), as he aimed to revisit history and the autobiographical overtones become the means to have the matter started, as Iyengar comments

The places that held an influence on Nirad's boyhood, the family antecedents, the cultural milieu, the nationalist Bengal, the cold war between the ruling and the subject races, the city and the University of Calcutta, the coming of Gandhi and the eruption of the new politics of the twenties these many environmental layers receive as much attention as the quirks and quiddities of Nirad's own temperament or the vicissitudes of his childhood, boyhood and youth (*Indian Writing In English* 591).

The 'Dependence Complex'

Chaudhuri's voluntary affiliation to English culture and history, especially his passionate support of the British Raj, and his affirmation of India's need for English rule, recalls Octavio D. Mannoni's theory of 'dependence complex' (*The Intellectual* 26). Mannoni states that some races feel the cognitive urge to be dependent and be under imperial rule and this is due to their endurance of an unanswered dependence complex as colonization was 'expected – even desired by the future subject peoples' (Mannoni 86). Chaudhuri's reading of Indian history is biased and it manifests itself in these terms. He emphasizes that India can only progress through British rule. After the Indian independence when the British left India it resulted to a repudiation of their duty towards the Indians they had ruled before the official declaration of the Indian independence (*Thy Hand* 26). Chaudhuri's observations can be re-viewed from Fanon's criticism of Mannoni's theory and theorization of hostility. Mannoni claims colonial xenophobia to be the result of paltry officials, small traders and colonial ineffectual people, not European civilization and its foremost agents. Three possibilities have been observed for natives as a ramification of colonization. The first is assimilation, which also consequences the natives to be unable to connect with their own roots. Secondly, a native can encounter a half-way assimilation where psychological antagonism take place usually concluding in malice directed at Europeans. Finally, no assimilation can take place (Mannoni 24). Fanon emphasizes that if

there is any evidence of this complex, then it is the ‘pathology of the colonized representing the effect and not the cause’ (Ranasinha 80). Fanon states that the colonized subject lives in a society that allows his ‘inferiority complex’ to evolve and paves the way towards firmness from the bolstering of this complex: ‘it is the racist who creates his inferior’ (*Black Skin* 84, 85, 93). Chaudhuri ironically vindicates the detraction of imperialism and as Naipaul states with regards to Chaudhuri’s *The Autobiography*, ‘no better account of the penetration of the Indian mind by the West – and by extension, of one culture by another – will be or can now be written’ (*The Overcrowded* 59).

Chaudhuri divides the entire span of Indian civilisation into Indo-Aryan, Indo-Islamic and Indo-European periods and establishes the fact that Indian civilisation in all the three periods has been strongly influenced by foreign civilization stating that,

three of the greatest historical movements have forced their way into India in successive ages and created three different types of civilization;...the civilizations have remained essentially foreign even at the highest point of their development within India and have ceased to be living as soon as they have been cut off from the source,...neither political order nor civilization has come into being in India when a powerful external force has not been in possession of the country (*The Autobiography* 513).

Due to his zeal for a foreign culture’s influence on Indian civilisation, Chaudhuri goes on to say that he expects, ‘either the United States singly or a combination of the United States and the British Commonwealth to re-establish and rejuvenate the foreign domination of India’ (*The Autobiography* 519). However, Chaudhuri’s quest was not for a search of own’s identity, as he never lost it or had any doubts regarding it (*Thy Hand* xxviii). His was an assimilation of Western traditions within a Bengali heart to emerge as Bengali humanist.

The Modernizing Tradition

Chaudhuri refers to William Shakespeare, John Webster, Charles Lamb and even Jane Austen and establishes their work as lucid, inviting a comparative study. His obvious parallelism is noted in his statements regarding *The Iliad* and *The Ramayana*. However, it must be considered that Chaudhuri’s lucid prose at times degenerates into hyperboles parading his insular sentiments as, ‘if any whole hearted Bonapartist were to be found anywhere in the world at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century they were to be found in Bengal’ (*The Autobiography* 105). Though there is an attitude of love for the Bengali intellectuals and literary calibres, yet the author bears a curious mixture of the feelings of love and hatred towards the English people. On the one hand he admires Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who argues for English education in India from 1823 and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Swami Vivekananda due to their objective criticism

of the conservative Hindu culture. On the other hand his account of European history is an epitome for man's struggle for freedom, '...fertilizing freedom had been enlarged in ever widening circles in the course of modern history' (*The Autobiography* 111). It is therefore important to locate him in the context of modernizing tradition within India, and not just as an eccentric Anglophile (Ranasinha 79). Chaudhuri sees himself as an object in a landscape or an impulse in a more inclusive and controlling rhythm and his whole presentation of the self is impressively tranquil and objective ("The Meeting of Language" 115); an intellectual's self that was shaped by the classical ideal of Greece and Rome. As a historian, Chaudhuri was of the opinion that he was an impartial judge of men and events. He is a man who speaking to men about ideas on religion and politics. As objectivity is a significant breakthrough towards a fundamental idea from the historical perspective which is the fountain of the idea of change, Chaudhuri establishes the loss of the distinguished past of India by stating that 'we shall never again achieve anything like the greatness and individuality of the Hindu civilization [as] that civilization is dead forever, and cannot be resuscitated (*The Autobiography* 521). He then goes on to praise the British Raj stating, 'None of the poems gave my brother and me greater amusement than those in the dialects including two in the Dorset dialect' (*The Autobiography* 199). This fortifies that Chaudhuri was a different individual by then, someone who had a psychic change through an internalizing of orientalist images by extolling India's past along with the ideas of India's present decay, and consequently the positive force of an imperial civilizing mission (Ranasinha 79).

The Synthesis of West and East

Chaudhuri's admiration and love for England and English literature makes him call Shakespeare 'the epitome, test and symbol of literary culture' (*The Autobiography* 197). His idea of England was that of 'a country of great beauty...which possessed beautiful spots...' (*The Autobiography* 113) which is an effect of a self-conscious detachment from his own culture, time and space, as the early twentieth-century European modernist writers. *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* is dedicated to 'The Memory of the British Empire in India' that describes all that was noble and ideal within as moulded and transformed by the Raj in India. Chaudhuri's argument is established 'from the personal standard point, the historical thesis has emancipated him from the malaise that has haunted me [him] throughout the life' (*The Autobiography* 526). In his view, India has remained static in its appearance in spite of mimicking all that is 'Western'. Chaudhuri demeans that Indian endeavour and this he does vehemently in his text in order to carve out a new culture of the stereotyped East which may be an answer to the binaries that the West constructs and thereby bring in a cultural synthesis. In this context he brings in the reference to the literary creations of Michael Madhusudan Dutta, Raja Rammohan Roy and Bankim Chandra who all contributed to bringing up an East – West cultural

assimilation. Chaudhuri's attitude towards the decline of Bengal springs from 'an anxiety of an entrenched but now somewhat beleaguered literati about the effects of democratization'. This decline of Bengal has been critiqued as one that

easily lends itself to a social conservatism that justifies class privilege by dressing it up as a meritocracy and a celebration of the nineteenth-century 'synthesis' of West and East' (Chatterjee vii)

and Chaudhuri becomes an extreme proponent of this view. Chaudhuri critiques the English for their hostile outlook in comparison to the orthodox Hindus who are believers of bigotry and false practices. In 1951 Mortimer in the *Sunday Times* commented:

If Mr Chaudhuri sees nothing good in his country do not imagine that he is indulgent to the English. He speaks with loathing of our superciliousness, cruelty and despotism in the days of the Raj; he is equally severe upon those English who now – always from the lowest motive – express sympathy with India ("The Square Peg" 3).

John Squire wrote,

Chaudhuri, a realist, is certainly no indiscriminate belauder of British rule; he has some damning things to say about the attitude of the British communities...towards the native inhabitants of India ("A Bridge Between" 706).

M. K. Naik and R. Parvathy are of the opinion that Chaudhuri cannot be considered as an 'anti – Indian' because he has entertained no ambition of hobnobbing with the English in India. Chaudhuri has condemned Indian society when he states that

the Hindu civilisation was created by a people who were actively conscious of their fair complexion in contrast to the dark skin of the autochthons and their greatest preoccupation was how to maintain the pristine purity of the blood-stream which carried this colour. The Hindu regards himself as heir to the oldest conscious tradition of superior colour and the carrier of the purest and most exclusive stream of blood which created that colour. When with this consciousness and pride he encounters a despised Micchhha, an unclean foreigner, with a complexion fairer than his, his whole being is outraged. The creature tries to console himself with the illusion that if in this world there is a foreigner fairer than him, it is only because that foreigner is a leper (*The Autobiography* 129, 130).

William Walsh attempts to refute the charges put against Nirad C. Chaudhuri's Anglophilia by referring to his stringent attacks upon the colonial impertinence of the local British Raj ("The Meeting of Language" 119). Though Chaudhuri had a special fascination for the beauty which is associated with English life – an unmistakable Romantic impression on his mind (Agarwal 29 – 39), but he could never think of England as he had perceived of Bengal and of India. We remember Chaudhuri's humorous

presentation of the Indianization of the text books that are in English for an easy comprehension for the Indian masses. He sarcastically adds that the British falls from its glory due to 'the bankruptcy of European civilization, its spiritual poverty and its moral in its inequity.' C. D. Narasimhaiah dismisses him, 'he seeks...to placate his western readers...' (*Moving Frontiers* 24). A reader for Macmillan observed,

It would seem to us difficult to doubt the nationalist feeling of the author of the *Autobiography*, but he has been criticized in India for being too partial to the West, and too critical of his own countrymen (Watson).

As a result we can deduce that Chaudhuri's criticism arises from a 'desperate concern, rather than from professed and perceived detachment' (Ranasinha 91).

Conclusion

Chaudhuri's presentation of India as a moribund culture which has become stagnant due to the lack of dynamism makes him debunk the Hindu culture, which for him is 'dead forever and cannot be resuscitated and to hope to create a second civilisation of the same order is for us today a superannuated piece of folly' (*The Autobiography* 521). Chaudhuri is of the opinion that all Indian endeavours in imitating the West have been a failure and what one sees is nothing but an immense expense of an Europeanization which has been debased in nature along with the Hindu and Muslim traits for which we are still not in a position to assume ourselves as modern in terms of spirit and temper. Chaudhuri's thesis in *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* epitomizes Indian history as consisting of three cycles during each of which 'a strong and creative foreign influence provided by a primary motive force, viz., the mid-European Aryan, the Muslim and the British respectively...appears very much like an intellectual extension of the wish fulfillment of self-confessed Anglophile alienated from his own culture' (Naik 265). Therefore, Chaudhuri eulogizes the British love for the actual which he found lacking in Indian civilisation. Through his intransigent severance from his countrymen, Chaudhuri entreats his 'location as an intellectual outside the dominant group' facilitating him 'to be free from ideological constraints or allegiance to any particular national constituency' (Ranasinha 88). Therefore, as a colonial one needs to dissociate one's own self from the amicable and concentrate upon the personal achievement before undertaking the authority for others, which involves endeavouring towards an honest dialogue with her/his own 'undeveloped' society (Rowe-Evans 27). In spite of all the allegations regarding the various biased arguments of the author, it cannot be denied that *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* has several merits which outweigh the faults in terms of logic, eloquent style, intellectual overturns and outspoken arguments which make the text a canon in Indian Writings in English. William Walsh considers *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* as

one of the finest examples of this genre to appear in English in this century and the most significant, single discursive work to be written by the love and hate of Indian-British relationship (*Indian Literature in English* 45).

In an interview for the *Times of London*, Nirad C. Chaudhuri is reported to have said, 'People are about half and half, against me and for. Previously all were against me. I know I am extreme. It is like a tug-of-war. I cannot stand up straight or the other side will pull me down. But I *know* my exaggerations' (Iyengar 601). Chaudhuri has reiterated the path of his estrangement and 'intellectual isolation' from the nationalistic overtones championed by his 'countrymen and contemporaries' that, according to him, emerged to be growingly 'impenetrable' (*The Autobiography* 414). Vindicating his alienation, Chaudhuri refers to Max Muller's observations that all Aryans in India are relocated and deranged as colonial Englishmen, because they were themselves immigrants to India (Ranasinha 83). This argument has been further developed by the author in his *The Continent of Circe* where he describes the atrophy of the Aryans in India. The 'Aryan heritage' is indicative of the imperialist communication of the elite, and it forges a parallel way of establishing the associations between the British and the Indians (Ranasinha 83, 84). Nirad C. Chaudhuri's writing is cathartic and his presentation of his alienation is liberating for him as evident when he states, 'my intellect has indeed at last emancipated itself from my country', which has facilitated the dawn of autonomy in him without dislocating or uprooting himself 'from the native soil by sojourn in a foreign country or schooling' (*The Autobiography* 607).

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