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TRADITION OF *OTIUM*: URBANE JOURNEY OF PHANTASMAGORICAL ELEMENTS IN AMIT CHAUDHURI'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Amit Chaudhuri's exploration of phantasmagorical characters often dives into the surreal, absurd, confused and fixed reality that challenges the bottom line of our imagination. His work typically unshackles characters with continuous urbane journeys. His novel's characters reflect an ingenious world's emotional and psychological aspects through the vicissitude journey of Identity. In this otiose/leisure journey, the characters might find themselves navigating through a landscape that blurs the lines between self-imagination and reality. Their experiences can be visualised as otiose, yet they often disclose profound insights about identity, society, culture, and humanity. Chaudhuri's use of vibrant imagery and unexpected juxtapositions creates rich miscellanies that engage readers, tempting them to ponder the vitality of each character's journey. For the current study, we have incorporated the psychological reader response theory with the assimilation of literature to resuscitate the impacts of Otiose on the life of the novel's characters. The journey of humour and melancholy invites the contemporary audience to rejoice in 'gaps'. Wolfgang Iser suggested filling the 'gaps' by audience self-interpretation of self-existence and the search for meaning in a seemingly indifferent world through the active process of introspection.

KEYWORDS: Leisure, phantasmagoria, Gaps, mysterious, magical, imagery, Iser

1 INTRODUCTION

Otium refers to free time, leisure, and contemplative time that is free from daily obligations. It also delivers us with intellect and spiritual life. It has been a subservient word since ancient times; Cicero and Seneca explored it for self-improvement. They termed life as 'living unnoticed', "re-proposing it as the doctrine of *otium*" (1). Furthermore, Horace and Virgil also made space for otium to foster creativity and tranquillity. St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas have taken *otium* in life to make a balance in life between creativity and contemplative life. Petrarch and Erasmus have given more importance to intellect and artistic endeavours in literature. In modern literature, the use of *Otium* is for self-improvement and work ethics. Matthew Arnold and Virginia Woolf have explored the need for leisure in the modern context. Mathew Arnold talked about 'moderate tasks and moderate leisure' in the poem *The Second Best* (2). That poem gave the idea of having leisure time in the course of nature and pleasure. Virginia Woolf also declared that leisure is very necessary for saving your life; she says to Logan, " 'if you are losing your leisure, look out, you may be losing your soul' (3)". William Henry James wrote about leisure under the same title, claiming the importance of free time to 'stand and stare' at the surroundings (4). Leisure has a very resilient impact on the literature and its elements. Amit Chaudhuri has been sanguine about using leisure. Chaudhuri has been a very keen observer of life-space and its 'gregarious galore leisure'. To establish ourselves with nature, we need free time i.e., leisure, for questioning about nature. Mr. Chaudhuri is a very artful writer in the modern era, and he is best known for the depiction of culture and identity crisis in his novels through migration and continuous search for self-space. In our current research article, we evaluate Amit Chaudhuri's novels through the lens of the tradition of otium and dream imagery: Phantasmagoria and leisure. There are many connotations of free time or leisure. Leisure is sometimes associated with free time or idleness. Free time/Idleness was initially considered a positive in the eighteenth century. If we closely read some textual works by Indians, we find useful interpretations of phantasmagorical and idleness/otiose leisure or *Muße*, which is a German word that resembles with Latin word *Otium*. *Otium* is eventually related to the Greek term 'σχολή'. σχολή Greek term can be associated with philosophical enquiry 'θεωρία'. Initially, Otium is

related to some social groups of courts in the past. The tradition of otiositas is prevalently based upon, mimicry of South Asian rulers and expatriate colonists. Male and females would have their free time in hand used for clubs and playing cards (5). The characters of Amit Chaudhuri's novels are inundated with the use of otiose leisure in self-realisation and learning the new dimensions of life. Every character goes through the sole journey of continuous self-knowing and social belonging. They undergo the tremendous exchange of dreamlike imagery through otiose leisure. The adaptation of dreamlike imagery comes under the term phantasmagorical, which was deeply rooted in the late 18th century, derived from 'phantasmagoria', a theatrical form that used projected images and illusions to create ghostly apparitions. This practice can be traced back to early forms of literary works, such as magic lantern shows, where images were projected onto screens to create preternatural effects to provide surprise for the audience. The concept emerged with the work of French inventor *Étienne-Gaspard Robert*, known as 'Robertson' who popularised 'phantasmagoria' in his shows in Paris. However, he attended the shows of Paul Philidor's *phantasmagoria* during the eighteenth century. These performances projected ghostly images—and were suited to evoke feelings of fear and wonder. These hidden and sudden emotions are vented through visualising the dark reality. Robert was born a conjurer (6). The Romantic movement in the eighteenth century incorporated the mysterious and supernatural, focusing on emotions, individualism, and natural elements. Chaudhuri has delineated the imagery of the society. His characters go into the themes of imagination and migration vicariously. The characters' journey explores self-imagination with cultural values. His conspicuous technique projects the true representation of an imaginative world and dream-like structures related to self-imagination. According to Mr Chaudhuri, the magic starts with names themselves in the novels. He took inspiration from the painting by F N Souza of Ulysses(7). Every course of literature ameliorates society; sometimes, it limits the superficial life situation through the cultural and mutual hybridisation process. In the 20th century, the world witnessed a rapid shift from physical craftsmanship to technological advancement. He told, through an interview with Anita Sethi, in 2013, " Calcutta is this so-called 'third-world' city". He compared Calcutta with Berlin (a European city). The glass church represents post-modernity, but the bombed church

represents the culture and history. Mr Chaudhuri enkindles a new dimension through the literary texts and eulogises the impacts of self-space in the modern world. He breathes life into the cultural study, which has been the ipseity of self-dignity. Amit Chaudhuri started to write through 'clear a space' while depicting journeys of self-discovery (8). Amit Chaudhuri has portrayed the character's development in the lap of social development; however, this rapid and extensive growth, scientific advancements, and social upliftment yearned for the world, with the gradual growth in the 20th century. It caused a loss of livelihood for the poor and working class due to the introduction of novel techniques and methods. The rise of the middle class and urbanisation led to an earnest transformation in society, developing a space for both '*fascination and fear*' regarding new technologies and ideologies. People started to migrate for better future opportunities. The characters in Amit Chaudhuri's novels show real imagery and the process of learning and gaining access to modernity. In *The Immortals*, Amit Chaudhuri talked about the rise of technological growth through; "The Car Horns has created an anxious music" (9), Chaudhuri has tried to use his otiose time) to understand the meaning of the unsung voices through the music of motor cars. As the familiar world changed, literature began to reflect these complexities through self-imaginative and often disconcerting narratives in society. If we further introspect the novel, Amit Chaudhuri suddenly introduced the concept of death, the death of Panditji; "The Panditji wasn't there: he'd died two years ago." But his teachings and cultural belongingness (protocol) were always present there about maintaining a relationship as a teacher with a student. He was a man of 'stark simplicity'. The imagery illustrated Otiose's journey and projected the life experience—teachings always persist. Mr Chaudhuri had a demeanour outlook about projecting the life predicaments through which we have to achieve stability in our world. The imagination of life can be seen through the Phantasmagoria lens. The quiddity of cultural values is deeply rooted in Amit Chaudhuri. He tends to provide us with a heuristic approach to learn more about the free space and to avoid anagapesis for culture and identity.

1.1 Cultural Representation of Phantasmagoria and Leisure

It comes from two words *phantasma* and *agora*, which means a gathering of illusions and imaginations. Phantasmagoria, as a concept, can be

understood as a reaction to this transformation of the contemporary world. It served as a lens through which authors could discover themes of identity, consciousness, and reality. The fascination with dreams, hallucinations, and supernatural elements became progressively prevalent, allowing writers to delve into the human psyche and question the nature of existence. Phantasmagorical, termed dream-like visions, elements are symbols of unreal things in life. Nathaniel Hawthorne relates the phantasmagorical elements to the works, mainly discovering mysterious and human psychic themes and adding to dream-like structures. In his work *The Scarlet Letter*, He was curious about the intellectual elements and was into photography's technological elements. He talked about the hyper-reality of proto-photographic elements (10). The surrealist movement, led by figures like André Breton, emphasised the irrational and the dreamlike elements, sometimes an autonomous way of writing. He was much concerned about "pure psychic automatism" (11), and he explored the philosophical implications; his works were often a mixture of dream and reality. He was obsessed with subjectivity and objectivity to portray 'hypnotic' effects on personality (12). Further, Surrealism often included phantasmagorical imagery, blurring the lines between reality and fantasy, dream and reality, as seen in the works of Salvador Dalí. Salvador Dali was a pioneer in psychology, and Freud influenced him. Surrealism was synonymous with Dali, as he believed in the visual representation of imagery. He had a profound emotional attachment to insects, which he expressed via vivid bug images. He believed that "his imagery must be based on a visually interpretative Metamorphosis of reality". He was famous for the 'paranoid-critical method' (13). The latter work discussed present Christmas, past Christmas, and future Christmas. It is positive and hopeful for the rejuvenation of Jesus Christ (14). Dickens's composition mostly showcases vivid portrayals of urban life, encapsulating the tumultuous vitality of the streets. In *Bleak House*, the fog enveloping London serves as a phantasmagoria representing bewilderment and moral ambiguity. The fog symbolises the concealed realities of society, illustrating the intricacies of the judicial system and the struggles of marginalised individuals. Dickens's skill in intertwining the mundane with the exceptional evokes a feeling of awe and trepidation, aligning with the phantasmagoria tradition of the contemporary period. According to Sumana Roy, He has a great sense, as we find with Salman Rushdie, as we

further continue— he talked about *Shadow Lines*, *Midnight's Children*, *Train to Pakistan* and *A Strange and Sublime*. He claimed Chaudhuri had a different way of portraying Political imagery and identities, which tell us about real-life problems (15). Mr Chaudhuri has remarkable fortitude to delineate identity and self-belongingness.

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Literary texts are the mirror of society. The reader has different interpretations towards the literary texts. Reader response theory deals with 'Real Existence'. Because Reader Response theory takes the reader as an active participant, which is almost opposite to New Criticism and Formalism. There are plenty of parameters of reader response theory, but we tried to use the Transactional method of Reader Response theory. The textual lines can be different for many readers for different points on judgment. The reader is influenced by personal experience and knowledge. (16). Personal experience is based upon social Phenomena'. The study of Phenomena is related to Phenomenology, which was developed by Wolfgang Iser. According to him, Phenomenology deals with daily life experience and consumed knowledge through 'active consciousness'. Iser discussed real readers and hypothetical readers. However, modern phenomenology was developed by Edmund Husserl in the early twentieth century to further deal with real readers and texts through the liaison. (17). The reader's response is further developed by Hans Robert Jauss to provide a 'horizon of expectation'. A textual meaning is never fixed, and it keeps changing according to the period of time. It depends upon education, knowledge and experience. According to the implementation of the reader response, Amit Chaudhuri has depicted the characters learning through their leisure time and gaining real-life experience.

2.1 Surrealism and artistic textuality in Amit Chaudhuri's Novels

Surrealism, an artistic and literary innovative movement that was instigated in the early 20th century, aimed to overthrow the norms of logical thinking and investigate the unconscious mind. Andre Breton initiated it through the work, *Manifesto on Surrealism*, in 1924. Inspired by Freudian ideas, surrealists sought to capture the pensive essence of human experience, often using astonishing collocations and magical components. Chaudhuri's work, entrenched in the reality of modern India, has surrealist elements that provide

a profound exploration of his characters' inner lives and social circumstances. Chaudhuri's works, especially *A New World*, symbolise the inexplicable dimensions of urban life. The vibrant metropolis of Calcutta functions not just as a setting but as a dynamic force that influences the lives of its residents. The unrestrained rhythms of urban existence are often portrayed via surrealism, encapsulating the bewilderment and alienation people feel in a swiftly changing milieu in a modern context. This novel narrates the tale of a man who returns to India after an extended period in a foreign land. It integrates aspects of magical realism with the surreal, intertwining quotidian existence with dreamlike episodes that personify the intricacies of identity and cultural displacement. In *A New World*, the protagonist's experiences fluctuate between the ordinary and the extraordinary, complicating the distinction between reality and fantasy. Chaudhuri's use of vivid imagery and surreal sequences envelops readers in a realm where the ordinary transforms into a mysterious world. This method reflects the psychological condition of characters struggling with self-identities in a city that is both lively and repressive. This work presents a protagonist who negotiates existence in an unfamiliar territory, examining issues of alienation and belongingness. The narrative intertwines realism with moments of surreal contemplation, portraying the protagonist's psychological conflicts and engagements with a varied collaboration of individuals. Chaudhuri's prose often intertwines reality with the bizarre, prompting readers to anticipate profound enquiries on identity, memory, and the human condition. His language displays lyrical beauty and acute observation of mundane life, engendering a phantasmagorical ambivalence that connects with its proactive readers. Amit Chaudhuri upholds a distinctive position in phantasmagorical writing, where his works combine surrealism with vivid sensory descriptions. His novels often embody the minutiae of contemporary existence, especially with Indian culture and identity. In the novel, as the door name plate says, 'Ananda Chatterjee'. It portrays the feelings of ancestors and respect for our elders in our lives. The Bengali language was portrayed to show linguistic chauvinism, "Esho Shona", and "come to thamma" (18). It shows the mutual respect and cultural values given by elders to the young men in the families. He used dialectic words such as "Pranam Karo, Bonny." Amit Chaudhuri has been a writer of people with cultural feelings and ethnic values.

2.2 Identity and phantasmagorical memories

Memory is a fundamental element in Chaudhuri's examination of identity, while surrealism offers a lens for grasping the incoherent essence of remembrance. In his works, memories are often shown as malleable, dynamic entities that influence individuals' self-perceptions and their environments. The amalgamation of dream-like imagery can be traced in *A Strange and Sublime Address* and *The Immortals* (19). The surreal depiction of memory facilitates an examination of the interconnection between personal history and Cultural as well as social narratives. In *The Immortals*, the protagonist's exploration of the music scene in Bombay is intertwined with bizarre memories of his past. These recollections, often permeated with regret and sorrow, illustrate the intricacies of cultural identity in a globalised context. Chaudhuri's storytelling technique highlights the non-sequential character of memory, demonstrating how previous events perpetually influence the present. For instance, when Shamaji's wife was chasing the children, he showed patience and was on the bed, " 'Are bhai, pareshan mat hona, don't get agitated' (9) ". This story, set in modern India, centres on a musician and his family, interlacing themes of artistry, recollection, and the continuum of time. The tale incorporates surreal aspects, contrasting everyday day with the exceptional while examining the essence of creation and life. Chaudhuri's style exemplifies surrealism, using poetic and evocative language that amplifies the dreamy essence of his novels. His focus on sensory details creates immersive worlds that obscure the distinctions between reality and the strange. This artistic decision enables readers to connect with the characters' emotional realms, enhancing their understanding of inner problems. In *Freedom Song*, the portrayal of the city as a living organism underscores the interrelation of individual and communal experiences. The protagonist's perceptions of the metropolitan environment sometimes assume bizarre qualities, mirroring his emotional conflicts and aspirations. This linguistic application enhances the story, converting mundane events into significant reflections on life. Chaudhuri's work examines the cultural tensions present in post-colonial India, where the conflict between tradition and modernisation often results in a feeling of displacement. Surrealism serves as a

medium for articulating these conflicts, enabling criticism of societal conventions while honouring the cultural legacy's depth. The *Afternoon Raag* illustrates the intricate relationship between music and memory, emphasising the nuances of ethnic identity. The protagonist's encounters in the realm of classical music are permeated with strange instances that illustrate his conflict between creative ambitions and societal norms. The surrealistic components in this tale highlight the malleability of cultural identity, illustrating its formation via individual and communal histories.

3 CONCLUSION

The complexities of a swiftly changing world are reflected in the mirror of phantasmagoria in literature; it all started in the 19th century. Amit Chaudhuri unravelled the human psyche through the continuous journey of life. The moment of living on foreign soil, in a foreign country, diluted the feelings of a gifted culture. Cultural amalgamation and imagination can be related to dream-like imagery and can be associated with Otiose/self-realisation. The tradition of otium removes our fallacy about leisure because it gives us space for self-realisation as a whole journey of self-assessment. The concepts of the supernatural—both real and imaginary—are illustrated in the works of authors such as Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Dickens, and Lewis Carroll. We have also traced dream imagery in Amit Chaudhuri's works. It demonstrates the irrational and rational aspects of the psyche in the context of the post-colonial era. The phantasmagorical elements in their narratives encourage readers to investigate the depths of human experience and query the nature of reality. Amit Chaudhuri's work serves as an illustration of the capacity of surrealism to investigate the complexities of urban existence, memory, and identity. Chaudhuri encourages readers to contemplate the particulars of modern Indian life by incorporating surrealistic elements into his narratives. The reflective commentary on the human experience that his distinguishing blend of realism and surrealism reflects the disorientation and richness of a world in flexibility. Chaudhuri's penchant for the investigation of surrealism remains a critical contribution to the literary landscape, encouraging readers to reflect on the peculiar aspects of their own lives as he continues to challenge the boundaries of modern narrative form.

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