

**Urban Humanities in Amit Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address*
and *Afternoon Raag*: A 'Spatial' Approach**

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to deal with the Marxist French philosopher Henri Lefebvre's concept of 'spatial triad' i.e. 'spatial practice' or the perceived space, 'representations of space' or the conceived space, and the 'representational spaces' or the lived space. To Lefebvre, social space is a social product and every society produces its own social space. For Lefebvre, perceived space is the physical space meant for our daily life; conceived space is the abstract rules, regulations, and ideologies determining all the spaces' range, role etc: and the lived space is the space directly lived by the users or the inhabitants. His "spatial triad" chiefly dealing with the urban space or the city space here works as the tool for examining different urban spaces as described in Amit Chaudhuri's first two novels i.e. *A Strange and Sublime Address* and *Afternoon Raag*. The stories of these novels without a strict beginning, middle and conclusion speak of the urban Bengali middle class culture. Chaudhuri's first novel represents the slow, chaotic, unorganized domestic life of Kolkata during 1970s through the eyes of a ten-year-old boy Sandeep, who comes to visit the house of his maternal uncle during his vacations, whereas the second novel captures some intimate and personal tension of the narrator for amid displacement and the desire to achieve foreign education. This paper examines how different spaces function as both material and symbolic dimension to explore cultural hybridity, identity, urban class struggle, and a desire for upward mobility with a complacent heart within the

community. This societal and humanistic study of space contributes to the exploration and expansion in urban humanities revealing the fork routes of literature by highlighting the interplay between space, society and subjectivity.

Keywords: Urban middle class, “Spatial Triad”, Urban space.

Introduction

This paper entitled aims to examine how the Marxist French philosopher Henri Lefebvre’s concept of ‘spatial triad’ i.e. ‘spatial practice’ or the perceived space, ‘representations of space’ or the conceived space, and the ‘representational spaces’ or the lived space can be used effectively to analyse different urban spaces as represented in Amit Chaudhuri’s first two novels i.e. *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991) and *Afternoon Raag* (1993). In these select novels, Chaudhuri captures the urban life with its multifarious nuanced complexities. Chaudhuri’s first novel represents the slow, chaotic, unorganized domestic life of Kolkata during 1970s through the eyes of a ten-year-old boy Sandeep, who comes to visit the house of his maternal uncle during his vacations. The second novel captures some intimate and personal tensions of the narrator for the displacement caused by his ambition of attaining foreign education. This paper explores the complexities and the problems of urban Bengali middle class society through a study of some incidents of everyday life spent in different spaces as represented by Chaudhuri. Henri Lefebvre’s concept of ‘spatial triad’ i.e. ‘spatial practice’ or the perceived space, ‘representations of space’ or the conceived space, and the ‘representational spaces’ or the lived space has been used here as the framework to study how urban Bengali middle class society becomes a product of the British colonialism by imitating their culture and lifestyle, and spend their lives with a dream of upward mobility with a complacent spirit within, and with other complexities around. This paper also argues that space here not only serves as a background of the incidents but also speaks of the different hues of the characters’ lifestyle and culture when studied with a Lefebvrian view.

Theoretical Framework

The French philosopher Henri Lefebvre makes a remarkable contribution to the ideas of space in *The Production of Space* (1974). In the Lefebvrian paradigm the first concept is ‘spatial practice’, which is the space of every single society or every community. It is regional and limited to a particular area. To understand the ‘spatial practice’ of a society, one has to decode

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the spaces of that particular society. It is also called perceived space. 'Spatial practice' is created out of an interaction between our daily life and 'the routes and networks which link up the places set aside for work, for our 'private' life and leisure' (38). So, daily private life is spent in the perceived space.

Lefebvre's second concept is also called the conceptualized or the conceived space. This is 'the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers, as of a certain type of artist with a scientific bent' (38). Actually it is the framework or theory to dominate as well as to sketch or to direct all other spaces. It determines all the spaces' range, limit, role or importance and implications in a society.

The third concept, which Lefebvre explained in his book, is 'representational spaces'. These spaces are of spaces of images and symbols. These spaces are called 'lived spaces' as the 'users or inhabitants' directly lived here. Sometimes, representational space becomes the space of some artists or philosophers who describe the space through some images and symbols.

These three situations (spaces) remain present in every social space with the predominance of one or two. In Chaudhuri's novels under study, the descriptions of the social spaces can be examined with these situations: the perceived situation, the conceived situation, and the lived situation; and this "spatial triad" effectively explores different complexities of urban Bengali middle class society.

Textual Analysis

In Chaudhuri's first novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address* Sandeep, the narrator comes to visit the house of his Chhotomama (younger maternal uncle) in Kolkata during his summer vacation with his mother. He describes different corners of the house and shares his experience as a ten-year old boy from Mumbai. The house of his Chhotomama is of two storeys and on the top floor there are two bed rooms. Apart from that, there are study room, bathroom, and prayer room. On the ground floor, there is the dining room. These rooms as the physical structures stand as perceived space, because here the family members of Sandeep's Chhotomama spend their daily lives, and in the rooms, there take place interactions among the family members as well as with the people, who come inside the rooms. The idea of different rooms for different personal purposes of life reminds a reader the British culture, which not only talks about categorization of spaces for different activities, but also speaks of an organized personal life of

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a community. The urban lifestyle of Bengali middle-class society in Chaudhuri's novels thus captures the cultural hybridity of the community.

The Bengali middle-class society is the creation of the British rule in India. Professor Subodh Kumar Mukhopadhyay has elaborately pointed out in his book *Bangali Maddhobitto O Tar Manaslok* that towards the end of the nineteenth century a group of Bengali people, newly English educated and the imitator of the English began to use the foreign products including dresses and drinks, and like the British they also went out in the afternoon with their car just to enjoy the mild breeze and pleasant weather. In the novel *A Strange and Sublime Address*, Sandeep's Chhotomama goes out in an afternoon with his family members and guests by his old cardboard like ramshackle Ambassador just like the British. The Ambassador in a family is chiefly used for personal causes, so as per Lefebvre's theory it is "spatial practice" (33) or the "perceived" (38) space. In this Ambassador, they spend some personal moments of their life.

This habit of enjoying the mild afternoon breeze continues in Chaudhuri's second novel *Afternoon Raag*, where the parents of the narrator go on an outing. But this time they are just husband and wife enjoying the moments without any other family member with them. Chaudhuri shows that the concept of family changes to nuclear one. The description within the story captures the deep love for the cooking utensils and the food items of the narrator's mother. This shows that unlike the characters of the first novel, the narrator's parents love the things more than human being. This attitude reminds one the postcolonial consumerist temperament of the Bengali middle-class society as represented in Chaudhuri's second novel. Here the Ambassador as a lived space explores that the urban Bengali middle class gradually finds such selfish consumerist way of life to be appropriate.

Once the narrator's parents visit the Bombay Gymkhana club which was "frequented mainly by company executives: general managers and directors" (Chaudhuri 31) to enjoy the afternoons. The narrator's father being a high salaried person could maintain the luxury of attending Bombay Gymkhana club with his wife. To be a member of a highly recognized club is a matter of maintaining social status and a particular type of lifestyle. In this way, the idea of the 'representations of space' or the 'conceived space' of Lefebvre may be referred to here as the strict norms and some socio-economic regulations are found at work in the establishment and functioning of a club. Chaudhuri's representation of Bengali middle class really reveals

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some characteristics practised by them mostly in the “conceived” spaces because they express their vanity and haughtiness if or when an order is wrongly taken. They even sometimes insult the waiters for some unintentional mistakes. When they summon the waiters, they do not expense any word; rather they ‘ring little brass bells’ (Chaudhuri 31) sitting on chairs. Thus, an unwritten strict regulation compels the waiters, the representatives of the marginal class society to satisfy the demands made by the customers who belong to the middle-class society. The insult to the waiters explicitly expresses the idea of class discrimination embedded in the mind-set of the middle-class society. The middle-class society is prone to exercise their power to their immediate lower class of people whenever they find a scope. In this way, Chaudhuri’s description of Bengali middle-class society in the club as an urban space in its lived situation discloses the degradation and retrogression of human quality among them though they are materially successful.

In the novel *Afternoon Raag* (1993) a Bengali young man studying at Oxford University becomes too much home sick and feels an extreme loneliness. In this situation, he memorises the events and experiences of his staying in Kolkata or in Mumbai. On such an occasion, the narrator portrays the picture of a lane in the suburbs of Mumbai where his parents moved to stay in a flat. The narrator describes- “The people who really belonged to our lane were those who were on its margins – servants, sweepers, watchmen, hawkers of vegetables and fish who sent their cries out to the balconies and went with their baskets from door to door” (Chaudhuri 110). In the quoted lines the servants, sweepers, watchmen, hawkers of vegetables and fish are living on the margin of that lane. This event may be analysed with the help of Lefebvre’s ‘spatial triad’. Lefebvre argues that upper class people, who use the power, always try to control the production of space and make use of the space to protect and preserve the existing power structures and to marginalise the others. In the above description, people from working class send their cries to the balcony of the upper middle-class people. Here ‘balcony’ is considered as a work of construction sketched and planned by an engineer; and it reaches the status of a conceptualized space or ‘conceived space’. Though, primarily a balcony is sometimes used for personal pleasure, actually there remain many options for the householders to exercise power and to endow preferred ideology over the people outside the house. Again, balcony is a place for communication between the householders and the streetwalkers. It provides many types of advantages to the householders. A householder can enjoy all the above-mentioned activities keeping his household matters unknown to a street walker or a hawker or to anybody in the

houses opposite to their balcony making their doors and windows closed and locked from inside. The householders may remain indifferent to the hardships and struggle of the street walkers, hawkers, servants or of the working class of people. That is why in spite of the cries of the sweepers, hawkers and servants to the balcony nobody comes out to the balcony as is described in the novel. The people of marginal class send their ('cries') complaints, rights, demands and grudges out to the 'balconies' of the upper and middle class. Here balcony serves the purpose of a space where the two different classes meet- the lower class with their complaints, demands and grudges; and the upper class with their ideologies, power and dominance. Thus, through a mere description of a lane Chaudhuri hammers at the existing norms of the society where some age-old social norms and economic principles persist even in the last decade of twentieth century urban India, whereas the entire world is developing day by day through reformation in the socio-economic and political field. Here in this description Chaudhuri symbolically uses the people of marginal class as his spokespersons for socio-economic and political reformation in India. Thus, balcony as a "lived space" explores different complexities of the urban middle class society represented in Chaudhuri's novel.

In this novel, the narrator's description of loading a rubbish truck in a lane by some working-men again captures the urban complexities. As a regular urban activity, the rubbish truck arrives in the lane where the narrator's parents lived in the suburb of Mumbai. He remembers the working-men, sleek and thin with their undergarments disgracefully making some rude noises while loading the rubbish truck. Hearing the noise, the sweeper women hastily come to the rubbish truck with worried faces to pour the dust and dirt in the truck. On the other hand, this harsh noise would seem to the inhabitant of that lane as cacophonous and disturbing; and from different parts of their houses, they watch the men engaged in the cleaning garbage from the lane. In the description, the lane serves the role of a "lived space" because the sound created by the tallest working-men symbolically suggests their outrageous protest against the upper- and middle-class people living in that lane. Again, the existence of different hierarchical lived space in different social relations is evident in the hurried coming of the sweeper women to the truck. So, in an urban society class struggle in different layers is palpable as represented in Chaudhuri's novel.

In *A Strange and Sublime Address*, the picture of a lane of Bengali middle class families in the early afternoon speaks a lot about Bengali middle class complacency. The narrator describes

“A mist of drowsiness hung over the lanes. In the still houses, families had eaten their lunch of rice, dal and fish and fallen asleep” (Chaudhuri 112). In this description ‘lane’ serves the purpose of Lefebvre’s ‘lived space’ for its symbolic implication to the description. “Mist of drowsiness” suggesting lethargic sleepiness and lacking energy and enthusiasm hints at Bengali middle-class complacency and comfort. In the early afternoon after having a good meal of rice, dal and fish – a typical Bengali menu, the family members fall asleep with full contentment and peace when they might have hundreds of reasons to wake, worry and therefore, to work. This complacency and lack of energy is evident in the lifestyle of Sandip’s Chhotomama, an owner of a small company to whom “Monday morning came like a fever” (Chaudhuri 21). In this novel Chaudhuri’s representation of Bengali middle class uncovers that there are needs and paucities in the families of Bengali middle-class people; but they lack enthusiasm and energy to fulfil them. They are desirous of upward mobility. But when they achieve their minimum necessities, they are prone to discontinue their enthusiastic attitude to work and progress and prosperity. They become satisfied and complacent.

Conclusion

Chaudhuri’s *A Strange and Sublime Address* and *Afternoon Raag* give ample scope to probe into the urban humanities through a ‘spatial’ approach. This paper attempts to highlight how a single space in its different situations i.e. perceived, conceived and lived situation gradually explores multi-layered complexities of urban Bengali middle class society. Though the stories of Chaudhuri’s novels do not strictly maintain the traditional norms of beginning, middle and conclusion, a “spatial approach” to different spaces of everyday ordinary lives of a community ultimately discloses some important characteristics of Bengali middle-class society. Different urban spaces analysed in the novels show that spaces here not only serve as a static matter, but also serves as dynamic aspects to portray different complexities and problems of urban humanities.

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