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Freedom and Its Irony in Calcutta: A Multi-Theoretical Reading of Amit Chaudhuri's *Freedom Song*

Mahananda Biswas[1]
Ph.D Research Scholar in English,Department of English and Foreign Languages, Central University of Haryana, Mahendragarh,Registration Number – UH22019220147

Dr. Sanjiv Kumar[2]
Professor of English,Department of English and Foreign Languages, Central University of Haryana, Mahendragarh

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Abstract

Amit Chaudhuri's novella *Freedom Song* (1998) is deceptively quiet. Set in Calcutta in 1993 — a city trembling in the aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition and the communal violence that followed — it narrates the daily rhythms of two related middle-class Bengali Hindu families. The novella, however, is far more politically and philosophically charged than its surface tranquillity suggests. This paper undertakes a comprehensive critical analysis of the theme of freedom and its irony as embedded in both the text's representation of Calcutta and in the lives of its characters. Drawing on postcolonial theory (Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak), Marxist and materialist criticism, New Historicism, feminist and gender criticism, psychoanalytic theory, spatial theory (Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey), and existentialist philosophy, this paper argues that *Freedom Song* performs a sustained, multi-layered irony: the very city that sang its freedom from colonial rule has, by 1993, become a theatre of new unfreedoms — communal violence, patriarchal constraint, class stagnation, ideological exhaustion, and the quiet erasure of minority voices. Chaudhuri's prose enacts this irony not through spectacle, but through the refusal of spectacle: the elliptical, pointillist style itself becomes a formal argument about the gap between the promise of freedom and its lived reality.

Keywords: *Freedom Song,* Amit Chaudhuri, postcolonialism, Calcutta, irony, Babri Masjid, communalism, Marxism, spatial theory, Indian fiction, New Historicism, feminist criticism

1. Introduction: The Ironic Space of Freedom

Freedom Song (published in 1998) opens with a seemingly ordinary act: an elderly woman named Mini arrives to stay with her relatives in South Calcutta, recovering from an illness. The narrative that unfolds is similarly unhurried — conversations over tea, walks through familiar streets, a son who distributes Communist newspapers, a husband coaxed out of retirement. Yet to read the novella as merely a domestic comedy of manners is to miss the profound irony at its very foundation. The city of Calcutta — once the capital of British India, the intellectual and cultural heart of the subcontinent, the cradle of the Bengal Renaissance, and the birthplace of Indian nationalist thought — is presented in 1993 as a city simultaneously free and deeply constrained.

The title, *Freedom Song*, is itself a multi-valent irony. The "freedom song" is sung on the streets by Bhaskar, the young Communist protagonist, as a rallying cry for an ideological project that is itself quietly running out of steam. The word "freedom" — swadhinata in Bengali — carries the enormous weight of India's 1947 independence and the rhetorical promise it embodied: freedom from colonialism, freedom from hunger, freedom from caste and communal oppression. By 1993, that promise appears exhausted. The demolition of the Babri Masjid in December, 1992 had unleashed sectarian violence across India. The Congress government was weakening. The Bengali Left was institutionalising into a bureaucratic habit. Calcutta, which had been synonymous with radical politics and intellectual ambition, was ageing into a kind of melancholic stasis.

This paper reads *Freedom Song* through multiple critical lenses to argue that Chaudhuri constructs a sustained irony: freedom is everywhere invoked and nowhere fully realised. The irony operates at the levels of politics, gender, class, space, and psyche. The following sections apply postcolonial, Marxist, New Historicist, feminist, psychoanalytic, and spatial critical frameworks to demonstrate the depth and ambition of Chaudhuri's thematic achievement. The paper concludes that *Freedom Song* is not merely a portrait of a city, but a diagnosis of the condition of postcolonial modernity itself.

2. Postcolonial Irony: The Nation's Unfinished Business

2.1 Bhabha's Ambivalence and the Third Space

Homi Bhabha's concept of colonial ambivalence and the "Third Space of Enunciation" (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1994) offers one of the most productive frameworks for reading Chaudhuri's Calcutta. Bhabha argues that colonial and postcolonial subjects inhabit a hybrid space — neither fully the coloniser nor the

colonised, neither fully traditional nor modern — and that it is in this ambivalent "Third Space" that culture is negotiated and contested. *Freedom Song* is set in the precise social milieu that Bhabha's theory most illuminates: the Bengali “bhadralok”, the educated middle class that was simultaneously the product of colonial modernity and the vehicle of nationalist resistance.

Khuku and Shib, the central couple, are archetypal “bhadralok” subjects. Shib works in a British-owned chocolate factory — the colonial economic relationship persisting into the postcolonial present — and Khuku manages the domestic sphere with the efficiency and anxiety characteristic of her class. Their world is saturated with English commodities, English institutional frameworks, and English-derived social codes, all wrapped in the Bengali cultural pride that the Bengal Renaissance bequeathed. This is Bhabha's Third Space made quotidian: a world that is neither purely Indian nor colonial, but a hybrid that cannot quite resolve the contradictions it embodies.

The irony Bhabha's framework illuminates is this: the “bhadralok” were the primary articulators of India's freedom — the class that produced Rabindranat Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, Subhas Chandra Bose, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. Yet by 1993 they inhabit a freedom that has become routine, hollowed out, and increasingly threatened by the very communal forces that Bengal's secular nationalist tradition was supposed to have superseded. The freedom they sang for has produced a nation that is now turning on its minorities.

2.2 Spivak, the Subaltern, and the Silenced Muslim

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous question — "Can the subaltern speak?" (¿in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, 1988) — resonates powerfully in *Freedom Song* through the novel's representation of Calcutta's Muslim community. Muslims appear in the novella almost entirely through the eyes of Hindu characters: Khuku is annoyed by the cal l to prayer from a nearby mosque that wakes her in the mornings. This irritation is presented without authorial judgment, as a perfectly ordinary domestic complaint — which is precisely what makes it so disturbing. The Muslim "other" is registered as sound, as disturbance, as inconvenience: never as subject, never as voice.

Spivak's argument that the subaltern cannot speak within dominant representational structures is enacted in Chaudhuri's novella with a literary precision that borders on the political. The sectarian violence following the Babri Masjid demolition — violence that killed thousands across India, including many in Calcutta — is present in the novella as atmosphere, as curfew, as the distant sound of a conch

shell. The Muslim community that suffered most acutely is absent from the text as speaking subject. This is not a failure of the novella, but its most radical irony: the freedom that independence promised to all citizens — Hindu and Muslim alike — is shown to be systematically distributed along communal lines.

Chaudhuri's decision to render communal violence through the peripheral consciousness of upper-middle-class Hindus — characters who are not malicious but simply unaware — enacts precisely the structural condition that Spivak identifies: the subaltern cannot speak because the dominant structures of representation do not create the conditions for that speech to be heard.

3. Marxist and Materialist Criticism: The Exhaustion of the Left

Freedom Song is in many ways a Marxist novel that is simultaneously a novel about the exhaustion of Marxism. Bhaskar's Communism — his selling of *Ganashakti* (Power to the People), his participation in street theatre, his ideological commitment to the working class — is the explicit "freedom song" of the title. Yet Chaudhuri treats this idealism with a gentle, affectionate irony that a Marxist critic cannot ignore.

From a Marxist perspective, the Bengal Left's peculiar position by 1993 is instructive. The Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPI(M), had been in power in West Bengal since 1977 — a staggering electoral achievement, but one that had transformed revolutionary ideology into administrative habit. Louis Althusser's concept of the Ideological State Apparatus (Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," 1969) in his seminal work, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (published in 1969 in French) is useful here: the Left Front government had become, precisely, a state apparatus — reproducing the conditions of its own dominance through education, cultural institutions, and party machinery, rather than challenging the structural inequalities of capitalist society.

Bhaskar's idealism, then, is doubly ironic. He is singing the freedom song of a political project that has already been institutionalised, bureaucratised, and defanged. The street theatre he performs, the newspapers he distributes — these are the rituals of a revolutionary faith that has become, in Gramscian terms, hegemonic. Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony (*Prison Notebooks*, 1929–1935) — the way in which ruling class ideology is internalised and reproduced not through coercion alone but through cultural consent — applies with uncomfortable precision to the Bengal Left by the 1990s: it had become the cultural norm of a city, a habit of thought, rather than a genuine challenge to power.

Meanwhile, the material conditions of Calcutta's working class — the ostensible beneficiaries of Communist rule — are barely present in the novella, and their absence is itself an irony. The middle-class family at the centre of the narrative enjoys domestic servants, reasonable comforts, and the leisure for political discussion. The class whose liberation Bhaskar's party promises is present only as domestic labour and street-level background. Chaudhuri's text, through its almost exclusive focus on the bhadralok world, performs the very class stratification it is quietly critiquing.

The candy factory where Shib is called back to work out of retirement is a particularly rich Marxist symbol. The factory is "sick" — failing, inefficient, resistant to reform. One can read it as a metonym for the entire Bengali industrial economy of the 1990s: a Nehruvian mixed-economy project in terminal decline, unable to adapt to the liberalisation that the 1991 economic reforms had unleashed. Shib's futile efforts to revive it — like Bhaskar's futile street theatre — embody the novella's central materialist irony: the freedom promised by both the national project and its radical Communist alternative has not delivered economic liberation for the city or its people.

4. New Historicism: 1993, the Babri Masjid, and the Uses of Context

New Historicism, as theorised by Stephen Greenblatt in his seminal book, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980) and Louis Montrose in his phenomenal essay, “Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture” (published in 1989, core idea is the historicity of texts and the textuality of history), insists that literary texts are not timeless aesthetic objects but are embedded in, produced by, and in dialogue with the specific historical formations of their moment. *Freedom Song* is a novel that makes its own New Historicist argument: it insists, formally, on the contingency of private life in relation to historical event, even while its characters attempt to insulate themselves from that contingency.

The year 1993 is not backdrop in *Freedom Song*; it is a structural determinant. The Babri Masjid demolition of December 6, 1992, and the riots that followed are the irruption of history into the domestic world that Chaudhuri's characters inhabit. The curfew that follows the demolition is one of the novella's most haunting images: the city falls silent, yet that silence — as Chaudhuri represents it — is the silence of a conch shell, a roar that you can only hear if you press your ear to it. This is New Historicism's fundamental insight rendered in prose: history is present even — especially — in its silences and in the texts that seem to speak of other things.

New Historicism also insists on reading literary texts alongside non-literary documents of their period — newspapers, legal records, political speeches. Read alongside the Commission of Inquiry reports into the 1992–93 riots, or alongside contemporary reportage from Calcutta newspapers, *Freedom Song*'s irony deepens considerably. Calcutta was largely spared the worst of the post-Babri Masjid violence, partly due to the CPI(M) government's intervention and partly due to the city's tradition of secular politics. Yet the novella shows this relative peace to be fragile, contingent, and purchased at the cost of a communal anxiety that simmers beneath the surface of every conversation.

Louis Montrose's formulation — "the historicity of texts and the textuality of history" (in "Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture" 1989) — is particularly apt for Chaudhuri's project. The text of *Freedom Song* is saturated with history (1993, Calcutta, the Left Front, the post-Babri moment), but Chaudhuri's highly stylised, elliptical prose also insists on the constructed, textual nature of any historical narrative. The novel offers no omniscient historical explanation; it offers instead the partial, distracted, domestic consciousness of people living through a historical moment they cannot fully grasp — which is, of course, how most people live in history.

5. Feminist and Gender Criticism: Unfreedom at Home

If the political sphere in *Freedom Song* is characterised by the ironic exhaustion of the freedom project, the domestic sphere is characterised by the ironic persistence of patriarchal constraint. A feminist reading of the novella reveals that the women characters — Khuku, Bhaskar's mother, Mini, Piyu — inhabit a freedom that is almost entirely circumscribed by the demands of family, marriage, and domestic routine.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's paradigm of "the madwoman in the attic" (*The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 1979) — the repressed, constrained female consciousness that exists in a kind of suppressed rebellion against patriarchal norms — has a particular resonance in the context of Bengali “bhadralok” domesticity. Khuku's world is bounded by the rhythms of the household: the management of servants, the preparation of food, the care of the elderly, the orchestration of family visits. Her occasional irritation — with the mosque's call to prayer, with her husband's recalcitrant business partners, with the difficulty of arranging Bhaskar's marriage — is the texture of a life in which subjective freedom is systematically displaced by domestic obligation.

The marriage plot in *Freedom Song* is a particularly acute feminist irony. The novella's main domestic anxiety is the business of finding a suitable wife for Bhaskar — a young man who has freely chosen his ideological commitments, his way of life, his public role. The women in the narrative, by contrast, have no such freedom of self-determination. Marriage, for them, is the institution through which their lives are organised and their identities defined. Piyu, Bhaskar's sister, is in a shadowy presence in the text — young, unmarried, her interiority barely explored — as if the narrative itself reproduces the social invisibility of unmarried young women in the bhadralok world.

Simone de Beauvoir's analysis in *The Second Sex* (1949) of woman as the "Other" through whom masculine subjectivity defines itself is directly applicable to the marital logic of *Freedom Song*. The future wife for Bhaskar is constructed entirely as object — a body, a family background, a set of qualifications — who will serve as the resolution of a family's social anxiety. The women who will do the searching, the evaluating, and ultimately the accommodating are themselves entirely instrumentalised within a freedom that belongs, structurally and culturally, to men.

It is significant that Bhaskar's Communism — his "freedom song" — does not include gender liberation. The Bengal Left's patriarchal structures were well-documented: the party was a masculine institution, its street politics a masculine domain, its vanguard theory premised on class rather than gender as the primary axis of oppression. The irony, then, is complete: the freedom song that Bhaskar sings does not sing for the freedom of the women in his own household.

6. Psychoanalytic Criticism: The Return of the Repressed

A psychoanalytic reading of *Freedom Song* — drawing on Sigmund Freud's concepts of repression, the uncanny, and the return of the repressed, as well as on the Lacanian analysis of desire and lack — reveals the deep structural tensions that the novella's surface calm barely conceals.

Freud's concept of "das Unheimliche" (the essay is included in the Volume-XVII of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 1953-1947)— the uncanny, the strangely familiar that is simultaneously alienating (Freud, "The Uncanny," 1919) — is perhaps the most productive psychoanalytic tool for reading Chaudhuri's Calcutta. The city itself is rendered as uncanny: familiar in its domesticity, strange in its historical volatility. The bhadralok characters inhabit their city as if it is permanently theirs, as if its streets and customs are natural, eternal, self-evident. Yet the post-Babri moment reveals the city's fragility — its communal harmony, its secular traditions, its Bengali cultural identity are all

contingent achievements, not natural facts. The familiar city becomes, in this moment of communal anxiety, slightly strange: the mosque's call to prayer, which Khuku has presumably heard all her life, suddenly registers as irritant, as threat, as other.

This is the return of the repressed in its most politically legible form: the communal anxiety that secular nationalist ideology had suppressed — the anxiety about religious difference, about the Muslim presence in a Hindu-majority neighbourhood, about the meaning of belonging and otherness — resurfaces in the wake of the Babri Masjid demolition. What had been successfully repressed for decades returns with the force of a historical trauma.

Jacques Lacan's formulation of desire as a response to lack (*Écrits*, 1966, English translation, *Écrits*: *A Selection*, 1977) also illuminates Bhaskar's Communism. Bhaskar's political commitment can be read as a response to the structural lack at the heart of postcolonial middle-class Bengali life: the lack of purpose, of meaning, of a project that exceeds the merely personal. Communism gives Bhaskar a symbolic identity, a cause, a role in a grand historical narrative. Yet Chaudhuri's ironic presentation makes clear that this identity is itself a kind of compensatory fantasy — an imaginary resolution to a real contradiction that cannot be resolved at the level of street theatre and newspaper distribution. The "freedom song" is, in Lacanian terms, the song of desire: always pointing toward a freedom that recedes as you approach it.

Bhaskar's resistance to marriage can also be read psychoanalytically. His refusal to accept the bourgeois domestic plot — the appropriate wife, the stable career, the reproduction of the class — is both a political statement and a psychic defence. Marriage, in the context of the bhadralok world, is the institution through which the individual is fully inducted into the symbolic order — what Lacan would call the Law of the Father. Bhaskar's deferral is a deferral of that induction, a prolongation of the imaginary freedom of ideology over the real constraints of social reproduction. The novella ends without resolving this tension, because — as Chaudhuri implicitly understands — the tension is constitutive, not accidental.

7. Spatial Theory: Calcutta as Contested Freedom

7.1 Lefebvre's Production of Space

Henri Lefebvre's argument in *The Production of Space* (1974) — that space is not a neutral container for social life, but is itself actively produced by social relations, ideologies, and power structures — is indispensable for reading *Freedom Song*'s representation of Calcutta. Chaudhuri's novella is profoundly spatial: its Calcutta is not merely setting but argument. The specific neighbourhoods of South

Calcutta, the streets, the domestic interiors, the factory, the spaces of street theatre and newspaper distribution — all of these are produced spaces in Lefebvre's sense, saturated with class, caste, and communal meaning.

South Calcutta — the "bhadralok" heartland where the novella is set — is a space of a particular kind of freedom: the freedom of cultural comfort, of social recognition, of belonging to the class that defined what Bengali culture means. Yet Lefebvre's tripartite schema — conceived space (the space as planned and imagined by those in power), perceived space (the space as experienced in everyday practice), and lived space (the space of imagination, memory, and symbolic life) — reveals the contradictions within this comfort. The conceived space of South Calcutta is that of secular, educated Bengali identity; the perceived space is the daily texture of domestic life, neighbourhood sociality, and political participation; but the lived space — the space as symbolically charged, as haunted by history — is inflected by the violent events of 1992–93 in ways that rupture the security of the other two levels.

7.2 Doreen Massey and the Politics of Place

Doreen Massey's feminist reformulation of spatial theory (*Space, Place, and Gender*, 1994) emphasises that places are not fixed, bounded wholes but are instead constituted by the particular sets of social relations that converge in them — and that different social actors have very different access to the mobility and freedom that space can offer. This insight maps precisely onto *Freedom Song*'s gendered geography of Calcutta.

The city's streets — the spaces of Bhaskar's political activism, of newspaper distribution and street theatre — are coded as masculine. Bhaskar moves through them freely, claimed as the site of his ideological project. The women of the novella move through the same streets quite differently: as shoppers, as visitors to relatives, as participants in the domestic economy. Khuku's movements are determined by obligation and propriety; Piyu's interiority barely registers in the text at all. The "freedom" of the city's public space is, as Massey would argue, deeply gendered: what reads as Calcutta's political vitality and intellectual openness is in practice a freedom available primarily to its men.

The Babri Masjid demolition also reconfigures the spatial politics of Calcutta. The mosque near Khuku's home, which had previously been simply a feature of the urban soundscape, becomes — in the post-demolition atmosphere — a contested space, a marker of communal geography. This is Massey's "power geometry" in action: the same physical space means radically different things to different actors positioned differently within its social relations. For the mosque's

Muslim community, it is a space of worship and belonging; for Khuku, it is a source of disruption; for the communal violence sweeping India, it is a target. The irony of freedom is spatial as well as political: the freedom to belong to a place — to inhabit it without anxiety — is distributed along communal and class lines.

8. Existentialist Reading: Bad Faith and the Freedom Refused

Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism — specifically his concepts of radical freedom, bad faith, and the refusal of freedom (*Being and Nothingness*, 1943) — provides another illuminating lens for reading the characters of Freedom Song. Sartre argues that human beings are "condemned to be free": we cannot escape the responsibility of our choices, even when we attempt to flee it by pretending that our actions are determined by external forces (social role, class, habit, ideology). This flight from freedom he calls "bad faith" (mauvaise foi).

Virtually every major character in *Freedom Song* is, in Sartrean terms, in some degree of bad faith. Khuku and Shib inhabit their social roles — housewife, retired businessman — with the naturalised ease of people who have accepted their facticity as their totality. They are not malicious; they are simply living, as most people live, as if their social roles were ontological necessities rather than contingent choices. Khuku's irritation with the mosque's call to prayer in loud speaker is a small but telling example of bad faith: by treating her communal prejudice as a natural reaction rather than a choice, she refuses the freedom — and the responsibility — of examining it.

Bhaskar, paradoxically, is also in bad faith — but of a different kind. His Communism is a project of freedom, yet it is also a way of escaping the terrifying openness of individual existence by anchoring it to a collective project and an ideological narrative. Sartre himself — a committed Communist fellow-traveller for much of his life — was acutely aware of this irony: political commitment can be both an expression of freedom and a flight from it. Bhaskar's resistance to marriage, his dedication to the party, his street theatre — these can be read as both genuine political acts and as strategies for evading the existential demands of selfhood.

The deepest existentialist irony in *Freedom Song*, however, is structural: Chaudhuri's characters inhabit a world where the political language of freedom (swadhinta, azadi, mukti) has become so routinised — through fifty years of independence, through decades of Left Front rhetoric — that it no longer prompts the existential reckoning that genuine freedom demands. Freedom has become, in Sartrean terms, a form of bad faith: invoked everywhere, lived nowhere.

9. Chaudhuri's Style as Critical Argument

No critical reading of *Freedom Song* can be complete without attending to Chaudhuri's prose style, which is itself a theoretical argument about freedom and its limits. The novella's pointillist, elliptical, Proustian method — building a world out of a hundred small perceptions rather than through the conventional machinery of plot and conflict — is not merely aesthetic preference but a philosophical and political stance.

Chaudhuri has spoken of his work as "a refutation of the spectacular" — a deliberate turn away from the exotic, the eventful, and the dramatic in favour of the mundane, the quotidian, the overlooked. In the context of Indian literary fiction of the 1990s — much of which was operating in the spectacular, allegorical mode associated with Salman Rushdie's "magical realism" — this is a meaningful dissent. To narrate Calcutta in 1993 without the spectacular machinery of communal riot, political crisis, or melodramatic personal tragedy is to make an argument: that the lived experience of most people — even in a city, even in a moment of historical extremity — is dominated not by the spectacular but by the ordinary.

This formal choice has profound implications for the theme of freedom. By locating the political crisis not in dramatic action, but in the peripheral consciousness of characters absorbed in domestic life, Chaudhuri shows how ideology operates: not through spectacular events alone but through the sedimented habits, the unreflective irritations, the comfortable routines that constitute everyday life. The Althusserian Ideological State Apparatus, the Gramscian common sense, the Bourdieuian habitus — all of these theoretical constructs describe precisely what Chaudhuri's style performs: the way in which the structures of unfreedom are reproduced in the most ordinary moments of the most ordinary days.

The irony of the title — *Freedom Song* — is thus also a formal irony. The novella does not sing. It murmurs, observes, and quietly records. Its freedoms are hedged and partial. Its song is in a minor key, barely audible over the ordinary sounds of a Calcutta morning — including, as Khuku might note, the distant call to prayer.

10. Conclusion: The Song That Cannot Be Sung

Freedom Song is, among many other things, a meditation on the gap between what freedom promises and what it delivers — in the life of a nation, a city, a class, a family, and an individual. The critical frameworks applied in this paper — postcolonial, Marxist, New Historicist, feminist, psychoanalytic, spatial, and existentialist — converge on this central irony from different angles, each illuminating a different facet of Chaudhuri's achievement.

From a postcolonial perspective, the freedom of independence has produced a nation still haunted by communal violence and the structural silencing of its minorities. From a Marxist perspective, the freedom promised by the Left has curdled into bureaucratic habit and class stagnation. From a New Historicist perspective, the domestic world the characters inhabit is shot through with the pressures of a historical moment they cannot fully see or control. From a feminist perspective, the freedom of the public sphere is systematically withheld from women who are expected to reproduce the domestic conditions of that freedom. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the political commitment of the idealist is itself a flight from the terrifying openness of freedom. From a spatial perspective, the city's ostensible openness is traversed by invisible lines of class, gender, and communal belonging that determine who may move, where, and with what degree of safety. And from an existentialist perspective, the very language of freedom has become a form of bad faith — invoked to avoid the responsibility that genuine freedom entails.

What unifies these readings is the figure of irony itself. Irony — the gap between what is said and what is meant, between what is promised and what is delivered, between the surface of things and their hidden structure — is both Chaudhuri's primary rhetorical mode and the primary condition of postcolonial modernity as he understands it. The freedom song that the title promises is, by the novella's end, recognisable as something more complex and more painful: a song that keeps beginning but cannot quite be completed, sung in a city that has not yet become what its own best aspirations demanded.

Chaudhuri's achievement in *Freedom Song* is to have made this irony not bitter but humane. His characters are not indicted; they are observed, with a precision and tenderness that amounts to love. It is precisely this love — for the city, for the class, for the ordinary rhythms of a world that is changing in ways its inhabitants cannot quite perceive — that gives the novella its extraordinary elegiac power. The freedom song is ironic; but the singing of it, in this prose, with this care, is itself a kind of freedom.

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