
Resisting the World through Memory: Domestic Interiors and Migrant Experiences in Amit Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address* and *Afternoon Raag* with a Reference to Sally Morgan's *My Place*

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to examine how the notable French philosopher Henri Bergson's concept of "Pure memory" and another French philosopher Gaston Bachelard's concept of "reverie" are used to analyse Amit Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991) and *Afternoon Raag* (1993). Of the two forms of memory- the "Habit memory" and the "Pure memory" the former is mechanical, repetitive and unproductive whereas the latter being more subjective recollects the past efforts and experiences in their original essence and creates an effect in the present situations and events of our life. Thus, one is influenced by the "Pure memory" in his / her present life. Again, according to Bachelard, while remembering past, one does not recollect the events repetitively; rather he gets an assimilated phenomenon of dreamlike reality. The stories of these novels without a strict beginning, middle and conclusion deal with the urban Bengali middle class culture. In *A Strange and Sublime Address* the domestic interiors, seemingly a fulfilled and satisfied world for the inhabitants disclose the necessity of memory to resist the hard reality with a same spirit as the migrant situations in *Afternoon Raag* explicitly express how memory becomes the most dependable mode to resist the new world. This paper highlights that in the domestic interiors, the characters memorise their static past far from being effected by of geopolitical and cultural dislocation; and in the migrant situations the character struggles to continue his cultural ties with his homeland through memory.

Keywords: - memory, resistance, domesticity, migration.**Introduction**

This paper entitled "Resisting the World through Memory: Domestic Interiors and Migrant Experiences in Amit Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address* and *Afternoon Raag*" aims to examine how the notable French philosopher Henri Bergson's concept of "Pure memory" and another French philosopher Gaston Bachelard's concept of "reverie" are

used to analyse Amit Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991) and *Afternoon Raag* (1993). The paper further focuses that memory functions as a mode of resistance both for the domestic interiors and for the migrant situations. Though Diaspora studies have contributed a lot to the postcolonial literature, the present studies on migration and interiority give importance to the study of memory. Bergson opines that there are two forms of memory- the "Habit memory" and the "Pure memory". Whereas the former is mechanical, repetitive and unproductive; the latter recollects the past efforts and experiences in their original essence and is more subjective. It creates an effect in the present situations and events of our life. Thus, one is influenced by the "Pure memory" in his / her present life. Again, according to Bachelard, while remembering past, one does not recollect the events repetitively; rather he gets an assimilated phenomenon of dreamlike reality. When one remembers the past days, he goes to the remotest part of his childhood where there is the pure form of memory or pure memory and he goes in the state of solitude thereby having a feeling of total freedom. Chaudhuri's novels under study capture the minute details of everyday life-stories of Bengali middle class society spent both in an unorganized, chaotic way in Kolkata during 1980s and in a more organized strict milieu of Oxford. In *A Strange and Sublime Address* the domestic interiors, seemingly a fulfilled and satisfied world for the inhabitants discloses the necessity of memory to resist the hard reality and in *Afternoon Raag* with a same spirit in the migrant situation it explicitly expresses how memory becomes the most dependable mode to resist the new world. Though the situations are different, memory here functions in the same way. Memory that usually produces nostalgia here functions as a mode of resistance to the outer world for the characters of the novels. In the first novel the characters memorise their golden past days to resist the hard reality caused by the socio-economic reformations in the then West Bengal, and in the second novel, the protagonist recollects the past days spent in his motherland India to make a resistance to the cultural migration at Oxford. To make the study more compact I take an Australian text entitled *My Place* (1987) by Sally Morgan. This Aboriginal Australian text having some political concern is used here as a lens to compare and measure the function of memory to resist the outer world.

Theoretical Perspectives

Henri Bergson, an influential French philosopher during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1928. In the second chapter entitled, "Of the Recognition of Images: Memory and Brain" of his book *Matter and Memory* (1929) (*Matie`reetMe`moire*) Bergson talks about two forms of memory- the habit memory and the pure memory. For the former concept, Bergson explains that the images of the events of our daily life are stored time to time in detail attaching the place and time of each event. It is mechanical and repetitive. As Bergson explains, habit memory works when one learns some material such as a poem by mechanical repetitive practice. For the latter concept, Bergson opines that pure memory recollects the past efforts and experiences in their original essence and it is more subjective; it "no longer represents our past to us, it acts it;" (93) and it creates an effect in the present situations and events of our life. Sometimes the pure memory makes one's present life happy, and sometimes one may not find any sort of happiness in the

present memorizing the past. It is logical and, here mind plays the major role. Through association it goes back to the past experience and enlivens the past, and, thus gives the past a new shape and meaning.

Gaston Bachelard, another French philosopher writes on memory and its function in his book *The Poetics of Reverie* (1971). In the third chapter, entitled “Reveries toward Childhood” of his book he highlights on what Bergson calls the pure memory. He points out the gap that “his doctrine of memory remains, all things considered, a doctrine of the utility of memory. Completely involved in developing a practical psychology, Bergson did not encounter the fusion of memory and reverie” (Bachelard 115-116). According to Bachelard, whenever one remembers one’s past days, he does not merely remember the events repetitively; rather he gets an assimilated phenomenon of dreamlike reality, as Bachelard states, “we relive it even more in its possibilities than in its reality” (101). Bergson stresses on the utility of the pure memory and Bachelard highlights on the process of creating memory with the help of reverie. Bachelard further asserts that there is “a potential childhood within us” (101). For this when one remembers the past days he goes to the remotest part of his childhood where there is the pure form of memory or pure memory and he goes in the state of solitude thereby having a feeling of total freedom. In this way through memorization, one may overcome the mental displeasure in his present life. Thus, memory functions as a mode of resistance to the hard reality whatever the cause may be. In the present paper I like to examine how memory plays the role of resistance to the hardships in domestic interiors as well as in the migrant situations represented in Amit Chaudhuri’s select novels, and to highlight the impact of memory this paper makes a comparative study of Sally Morgan’s *My Place*.

Textual Analysis

Chaudhuri’s first novel entitled *A Strange and Sublime Address* is a record given by a ten year old boy Sandeep, who comes to visit the house of his maternal uncle in Kolkata (in the novel Calcutta) during his holidays. The events of the novel centre round his two consecutive visits to Kolkata. Sandeep, the narrator of the novel sometimes makes some observations on the lifestyle of his Chhotomama, a representative of Bengali middle class society in Chaudhuri’s novel. Chaudhuri sometimes uses the stream of conscious technique to unfold some events of the characters of his novel. . In his first visit during his summer vacation, when Sandeep has to pass the day time alone without his cousins for the reopening of his cousin’s school, he begins conversation with his aunt. When Sandeep asks her aunt about her youth and marriage, at first, she shows her false disinterest in the matter, but very soon, she begins to memorise the happy days of her youth and her marriage in details. She happily memorises how she was decorated with “chandan and sindoor” on her face, “and kaajal” (Chaudhuri 107) around her eyes on the day of her marriage. As a reply to a single question of Sandeep, his aunt memorises her marriage in detail, added with much interest and opinion. She even discloses some personal matters happened on that particular date with her husband to Sandeep. In the conversation, she also shares her feelings of giving birth to her

two sons. Thus, she memorises her beautiful days of excitement, fulfilment, and happiness. During her conversation with Sandeep, she does not feel boredom or disgust. As a reply to what Sandeep would do then, she continues her conversation even “in a sleep-heavy voice” and suggests Sandeep to look after “some chilli plants” (Chaudhuri 110) she had planted in a pot in the terrace. Here, Sandeep’s aunt’s reactions are very much like a typical Bengali woman, who always finds immense happiness on remembering the days of her marriage, and feels like a free bird, who finds a new world full of possibilities and imaginations however much miserable or struggling the married life she leads. She even does not feel boredom and tiredness when she really feels sleepy; rather she continues her conversation with Sandeep on the same topic just to lull on the thought more and have mental satisfaction and pleasure. Here Sandeep’s aunt is as if the spokesperson of every Bengali middle class woman, to whom the day of her marriage is the most glorious day in her whole life because on no other day she is given any importance in the patriarchal society. Again, to a woman the memory of her marriage day remains the most glorious day in her life till the date of her husband’s living; and after the death of her husband the memory of her marriage becomes more blurred the more she passes the days, because the cause of her glorious memory of her marriage was, obviously her husband. For this reason, Sandeep’s Chhordimoni, who has lost her husband in the long past does not have more interest in memorising the days of her marriage and for Sandeep’s aunt the matter is exactly the opposite. For Sandeep’s aunt, it is not only the pure memory of Bergson that transfers her to a world of happiness, but it is also for “an assimilated phenomenon of dreamlike reality” (Bachelard 110) that helps to create such memory, thereby providing her such happiness. Thus, to Sandeep’s aunt memory here functions as a resisting force confronting with the limitations of middle class society. She may keep aside her hundreds of complaints of unfulfilled demands in her married life when she memorises the day of her marriage. In the domestic interiors, where the women folk usually spend their maximum time of their lives resist the outer world through memory of a few selected moments of their lives. In this way, Chaudhuri represents the Bengali middle class society through some common and ordinary events of their life in a very casual manner.

Chaudhuri’s second novel entitled *Afternoon Raag* speaks of the narrator’s staying at Oxford for his higher study, and during this time the narrator primarily becomes nostalgic when he memorises different events of his homeland India. The memory of his past days sometimes creates a space in his mind to confront with the odds of his life at Oxford. Chaudhuri describes such an event of the narrator in which he remembers the day of his buying his first tanpura (a musical instrument) with his guru. The narrator recollects, “It was on an afternoon in August I bought my first tanpura. We were visiting Calcutta then” (Chaudhuri 42). The memory of his guru is very much prominent, and he describes the total appearance of his guru. He even does not forget to recollect which raagas his guru played in his tanpura in that afternoon. The narrator then significantly comments on that remembering of the past days in his migrant situation that it is not a mere memory but it is a premonition. Staying abroad in his migrant situation when he remembers the lively and delightful scene

with his loved one, the boundary of memory melts, and he experiences a dream-like situation. Gaston Bachelard, in his *The Poetics of Reverie* gives a detailing of the functions of memory, and in doing that he also points out the relation of memory, dream, and reverie. He says, “in order to relieve the values of the past, one must dream, must accept the great dilation of the psyche known as reverie in the peace of a great repose” (Bachelard 105). So, sometimes one’s memory leads him to dream. So, as per Bachelard, memory and dream overlaps each other in the process. Not only that, sometimes the past appears before an individual in such a lively way that the boundary of the past and the present disperses. At that moment, the individual experiences his past days in its original spirit once more. In the present description of Chaudhuri’s auto fiction, the narrator experiences such feelings for his music teacher. To the narrator, the memory of his music teacher not only becomes dream-like, but it is more than dream; it is a premonition. For the intensity of his feelings, his memory goes back to the original spirit thereby transforming into reverie. In the reverie, he experiences one kind of tranquility and happiness. The life at Oxford seems to the narrator monotonous, uninspiring, boring and less joyful. He is culturally displaced in his migration at Oxford. The tension in the new culture forces him to find ways to live a real life of freedom and happiness. In such migrated situation his memory of his guru along with the musical instrument functions as a mode of resistance; and this resistance provides him with ample space to live a life in his own way. In this way, in Chaudhuri’s *Afternoon Raag* the narrator again and again memorises many events spent in his motherland to resist the culturally new world.

In Sally Morgan’s semi-autobiographical novel *My Place* the narrator captures the role of domestic memory to reconstruct her Aboriginal identity which was so long suppressed for being excluded from the society. The text captures the total picture beginning from Morgan’s childhood to her adulthood when she seeks her identity and root. Though primarily her family members try to conceal their Aboriginal identity from her, after repeated plea they ultimately disclose their root which they keep suppressed for colonial racism and social exclusion because in Australian society the Aboriginals are punished in various ways as is represented in the novel. The colonial power was so prominent that it directly makes remarkable effect in their personal life. Usually, the family members live a life of comfort and openness in a family, but in Morgan’s novel, the inhabitants Sally, her mother Gladys, her grand-mother Daisy and her great-uncle Arthur live a life of concealment. But the domestic memory of the family members functions here as a mode of resistance against the colonial power to erase the Aboriginals from the Australian social and political history. In the novel, after the revelation of her own Aboriginal identity, Sally becomes desperate to openly establish her own Aboriginal identity in the Australian society. She does not feel shame to be identified as Aboriginal anymore which her family members do. She now claims her place in the Australian Aboriginal history. The title “My Place” here suggests Sally’s own position and identity in the context of Australian socio-political history. As per Bergson, the memory of Sally’s family members is the “pure memory” because this memory of the family members not only speaks of the events in a mechanical way; rather the memory of different family

members captured in the long past in different situations reveal and enliven their pains, cries, difficulties before Sally in a new way for which a transformation takes place in Sally;s mind. Thus, memory here functions as a mode of resistance to the colonial erasure.

Conclusion

This paper makes a comparative study on the function of memory. Amit Chaudhuri's select novels do not have the traditional temporal setting. His novels are written following the stream of consciousness technique, and in the novels memory and reverie play important role to resist the outer world. Whereas in Chaudhuri's select novels, memory helps the characters to resist their outer world of middle class limitations in the domestic interiors and the cultural displacement and loss of identity in the migrant situation; in Morgan's semi-autobiographical novel, domestic memory resist the colonial power of erasing their own Aboriginal identity. Bergson's concept of "pure memory" and Bachelard's concept of "reverie" really point out the range and function of memory. These texts altogether focus on a common fact that it is not always necessary to make a loud or revolutionary approach for resistance; resistance is possible and can be effective through personal, domestic memory in a quiet manner.

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