

## A STRANGE AND SUBLIME ADDRESS

'Funny, delicate, sensuous, evocative . . . made me laugh aloud. The best portrait of India today I've read'

Margaret Drabble

'This evocation of the routine, quotidian magic of normality strikes me as an extraordinary thing to have brought off . . . mesmerizing'

John Lanchester, *Vogue*

## AFTERNOON RAAG

'Enchanting, studded with moments of beauty more arresting than anything to be found in a hundred busier and more excitable narratives . . . Chaudhuri has proved that he can write better than just about anyone of his generation'

Jonathan Coe, *London Review of Books*

'This immensely subtle novel both estranges and gently strokes the surface of English and Indian life. I know of nothing in English fiction that resembles it'

Tom Paulin

## FREEDOM SONG

'An immensely gifted writer . . . his novels are crammed with breathtaking sentences, sharp characterizations, comic set pieces and melancholy grace notes'

*New York Times Book Review*

'Chaudhuri writes about India like no one else . . . Exquisite and supremely haunting, a work of contemporary fiction by a world-class writer'

Robert McCrum, *Observer*

 PICADOR

www.picador.com

Jacket photograph:  
© William Gedney  
Photographs and Writings.  
Rare book, Manuscript,  
and Special Collections  
Library, Duke University

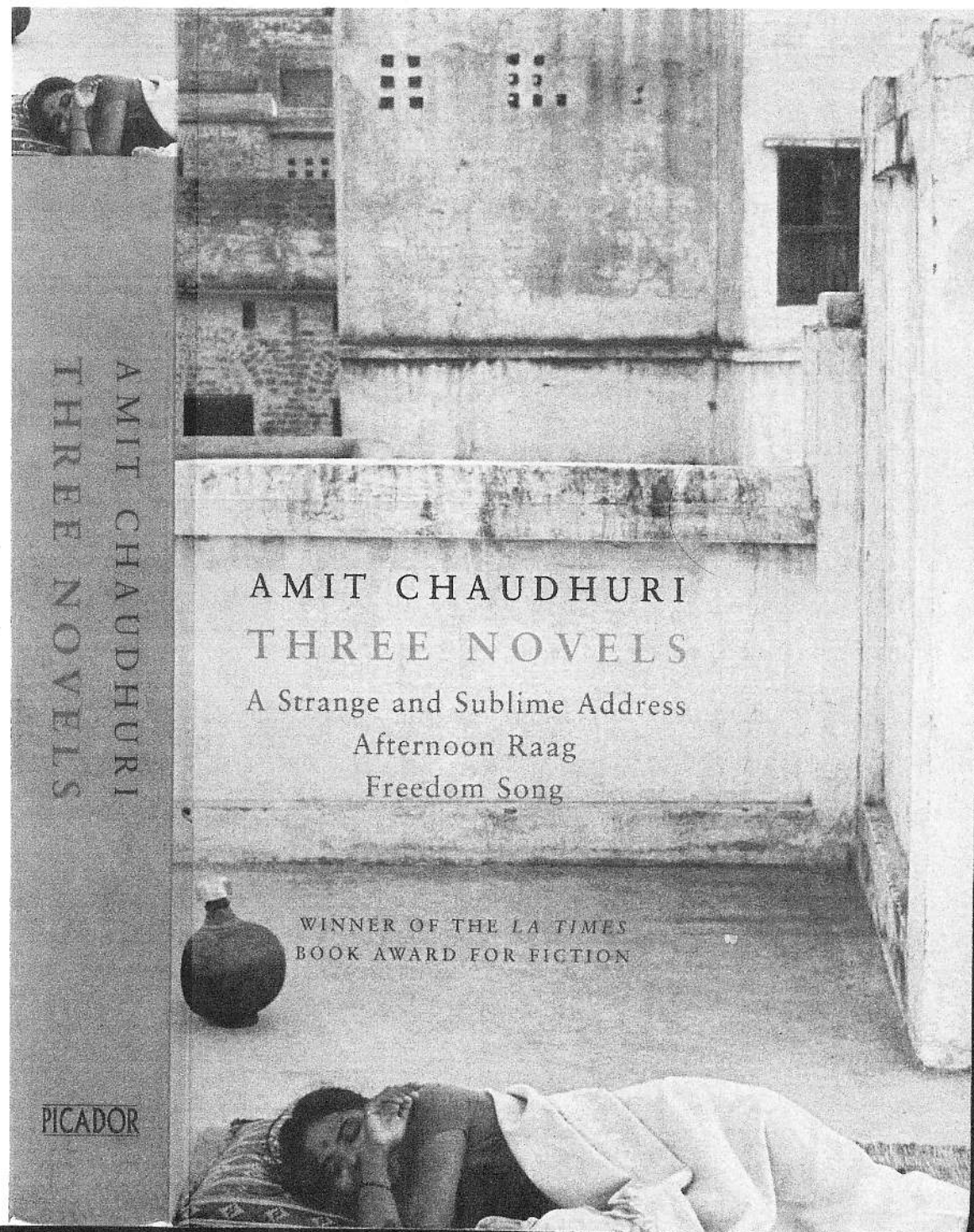
ISBN 978-0-330-48275-2



9 780330 482752

9 0300

UK £9.99 CDN \$19.99



'I have not been so excited upon reading a (for me) new writer since coming upon Laurence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* many years ago . . . To read Chaudhuri is to offer yourself the unmitigated pleasure of being in the company of the absolutely first rate, to see again the possibilities of the novel as an art form'

JIM HARRISON

'No lover of literature will fail to love these vivid novels by a master of prose'

ANNIE DILLARD

AMIT CHAUDHURI was born in Calcutta in 1962 and brought up in Bombay. He is a graduate of University College, London, was at Balliol College and later Creative Arts Fellow at Wolfson College, Oxford. His first book, *A Strange and Sublime Address*, won first prize in the Betty Trask Awards, the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book (Eurasia) 1992 and was shortlisted for the 1991 *Guardian* Fiction Prize. *Afternoon Raag* won the 1993 Southern Arts Literature Prize and won the Encore award for Best Second novel. *Freedom Song* was published in 1998 and in the US, where it was published with his first two books, was awarded the *LA Times* Book Prize for Fiction. His most recent novel, *A New World*, was published to great acclaim in 2000. He is also the editor of *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*. Amit Chaudhuri's work has appeared in various publications including the *London Review of Books*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Granta* and the *New Yorker*. He lives with his wife and daughter in Calcutta.



*A Strange and Sublime Address* first published 1991 by William Heinemann Ltd  
*Afternoon Raag* first published 1999 by William Heinemann Ltd  
*Freedom Song* first published 1998 by Picador

This omnibus edition first published 2001 by Picador  
an imprint of Pan Macmillan Ltd  
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR  
Basingstoke and Oxford  
Associated companies throughout the world  
[www.panmacmillan.com](http://www.panmacmillan.com)

ISBN 978-0-330-48275-2

Copyright © Amit Chaudhuri 1991, 1999, 1998, 2001

The right of Amit Chaudhuri to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Design and Patents Act 1988

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of the publisher. Any person who does any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

5 7 9 8 6 4

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset by SetSystems Ltd, Saffron Walden, Essex  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham, Wiltshire

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Visit [www.picador.com](http://www.picador.com) to read more about all our books and to buy them. You will also find features, author interviews and news of any author events, and you can sign up for e-newsletters so that you're always first to hear about our new releases.

## Contents

### A STRANGE AND SUBLIME ADDRESS

i

### AFTERNOON RAAG

175

### FREEDOM SONG

279

MANDIRA LIVED IN a room in college. She had come to Oxford two years after me, and I first saw her in hall. She spoke English, I noticed, with a slight American accent, talked actively at the table, walked in what is called 'a brisk manner', and was surrounded by English friends. She was small and roundish, and a favourite with the porters and stewards, who would wink at her, or put an arm around her, and call her 'love' or 'dear', as the English do, and not take her very seriously. I did not like her, but, when I was bored, I would go to her room and drink a cup of tea. I gradually got over my tentativeness, and came to realize that a knock on her door would not be unwelcome, for she was always very hospitable in her disorganized way. The first five minutes would be spent in me settling down, after a preamble during which I decided where I should sit, on the armchair in a way that was both tortured and patient, and then open a bantering conversation with her in *medias res*; all this I took to be courtesy, but it made her uncomfortable, for I remember her as a compound of movement and aimless speed, putting the kettle on the boil, and then running down a flight of stairs to the kitchen for her carton of milk. Shyness made her quick, while I, by contrast, was slow. When she was gone for that minute, I would be alone in her room, with the photographs on the wall, the secret things and cups and clothes in her cupboard, the badly made bed, the washbasin and mirror, the textbooks on the table and the floor, absorbing the materiality of the room and also its cheerful, fleeting makeshiftness, and not knowing what to think. She was not a very tidy person, but her attempt at order and creating the semblance

of a household, even the clumsy tear at the spout of the milk-carton, touched me. These undergraduate rooms were larger and more comfortable to look at than the box-like, modern rooms in my building. A light hung from the ceiling, enclosed by a comical, globe-like shade, and at evening it gave a light that was both encompassing and personal. The window opened on to a path to the garden and the hall, and all day, laughter and footsteps could be heard, coming and going, and these sounds too became a part of the room's presence.

In the morning, I looked forward to the small journey I made across the road, glancing right and left with avid interest for oncoming cars, to see if I had any mail. The pigeon-holes, after the poverty of Sunday, its forced spiritual calm, seemed to overflow humanely with letters on Monday, and even if I had not got any, that small walk did not lose its freshness and buoyancy, and a tiny and acute feeling of hope did not desert me in all my mornings. From about half past nine to ten, there was a hubbub as students stooped or stood on tip-toe to peep into pigeon-holes, and sorted and sifted letters, and the mail-room had an air of optimism, of being in touch with the universe, found nowhere else in Oxford. When there *were* letters for me – the cheap, blue Indian aerogrammes from my mother – they lay there innocently like gifts from a Santa Claus, they did not seem material at all, but magical, like signs. Then I would miss the special feeling of mornings at home, I would think benignly of my mother's good health, and how she suffers from nothing but constipation, how for three days she will go without having been to the toilet, with an abstracted look on her face, as if she were hatching an egg. Secretively, she will concoct a mixture of Isab-gol and water, and stir it ferociously before drinking it. Then, one day, like a revelation, it will come, and she will have vanished from human company. My father, a great generalizer, collector of proverbs, shows no concern over her health, displays no bitterness.

The furniture in Mandira's room – the bed, the study-table, its chair, the cupboard, the bookshelves – was old, enduring. The armchair was solid and stoic, and seemed to cradle the space that existed between its thick arms; one felt protected when one sat in it. As I got to know Mandira better, as we became intimate and then grew increasingly unhappy, the room became her refuge, her dwelling, and when she said, 'I want to go back to my room', the words 'my room' suggested the small but familiar vacuums that kept close around her, that attended to her and guided her in this faraway country. Because, for a foreigner and a student, the room one wakes and sleeps in becomes one's first friend, the only thing with which one establishes a relationship that is natural and unthinking, its air and light what one shares with one's thoughts, its deep, unambiguous space, whether in daytime, or in darkness when the light has been switched off, what gives one back to oneself. The bed and chairs in it had an inscape, a life, which made them particular, and not a general array of objects. That is why, when she spoke of her room, I think what she meant was the sense of not being deserted, of something, if not someone, waiting, of a silent but reliable expectancy.

The room had other rooms next to it and other rooms facing it. Sometimes, I would come up the staircase and enter the corridor to find Mandira leaning out of a half-closed door talking to the American girl who lived opposite, who would be standing by her own door. Even when I was inside the room, they would continue their conversation, and I would sit on the chair and watch Mandira's back; from there I could listen to the voice of the invisible girl, and to her rising peals of laughter. For ten minutes they would say goodbye to each other, until there came a rounded silence, and Mandira closed the door. What was missing was the background sound of old people and children, of babies and mothers, of families; instead one heard people running up and down the staircase, or visitors approaching and knocking.

There was a toilet near the room whose cistern gurgled candidly each time someone flushed it, and a bath to which men in dressing-gowns went solemnly in the evening, and women with towels around their heads, less solemn and with an air of freedom. From the bath everyone returned radiant and clean, and slightly ashamed. As I passed to or from Mandira's room, I would encounter them but not look at them, for I had learnt that the English do not consider it polite to look at each other, but nevertheless I remember the embarrassment of the men, and the opulent towels like Moorish turbans around the women's hair.

WHILE READING the *Times of India* each morning, my father spares a minute for the cartoon by R. K. Laxman. While my mother is, like a magician, making untidy sheets disappear in the bedroom and producing fresh towels in the bathroom, or braving bad weather in the kitchen, my father, in the extraordinary Chinese calm of the drawing-room, is admiring the cartoon by R. K. Laxman, and, if my mother happens to be there, unselfishly sharing it with her. She, as expected, misunderstands it completely, laughing not at the joke but at the expressions on the faces of the caricatures, and at the hilarious fact that they talk to each other like human beings. On important days, Laxman occupies a large square in the centre of the newspaper, which he fills with curved or straight lines that strangely look like prime ministers and politicians, pursued by hairy, allegorical monsters called Communalism and Corruption. On the right hand corner of the page, there is a smaller square, in which small-scale absurdities and destinies are enacted, witnessed through a window by a passer-by, hapless, moustached, bespectacled, child-like, in a dhoti and chequered jacket, he little knowing that millions regard him daily through this other wonderfully simple window around his world.

My parents knew each other from childhood; both were born in undivided Bengal, in Sylhet, which is now in Bangladesh. In the late forties, my father went to England, and six years later, my mother; there, in London, they were married. In those days, Indian women were still a rare sight in England, and often, as the newly-married couple walked down the road, they would be

stopped by an Englishman who would politely request the young man's permission to take his wife's picture. The young man would then, as he still does so often to so many things, give his good-natured and gentle assent. Prying but harmless old women would enquire, at lonely bus-stops, what the red dot on my mother's forehead signified; and for many months, a picture of her hung among other photos at a studio on Regent Street. Such a good cook was she, and such an inspired purchaser of herring and stewing lamb, that my poor father, neglected and underfed for six years, rapidly gained weight and happiness after marriage. While my mother took up a full-time clerical job, my father sat for and, at last, passed his professional exams. It was while working at the India Office, and making conversation with the large fish-monger, who called her 'love' and 'dear', and saved the pieces of turbot and halibut most precious to her, that she picked up spoken English. Like most Bengalis, she pronounces 'hurt' as 'heart', and 'ship' as 'sheep', for she belongs to a culture with a more spacious concept of time, which deliberately allows one to naively and clearly expand the vowels; and yet her speech is dotted with English proverbs, and delicate, un-Indian constructions like, 'It's a nice day, isn't it?' where most Indians would say, straightforwardly, 'It's a nice day, no?' Many of her sentences are plain translations from Bengali, and have a lovable homely melody, while a few retain their English inflections, and are sweet and foreign as the sound of whistling.

They returned to India by sea, on the Anchor Line First Class. Those were the last days of the world's flatness, when, as in a map in an atlas, the continents were still embroidered upon a vast blue handkerchief of water. That fifteen-day-long, floating world between two worlds – England and India – surrounded on all sides by horizon, remains clearly in my mother's mind as a brief enchantment. What marvellous food was served, both Indian and Continental, what memorable puddings! In the evening, the ladies

in saris and evening dresses, accompanied by their husbands, went out to the deck to enjoy the cool air. When darkness falls at sea, and the only light is the light on the deck on which people chat with each other as if on a promenade in a town, dressed in clothes selected after quiet and unobtrusive meditation – the selection representing some solitary, individual but habitual predilection which only the spouse recognizes – how unique, in that darkness of water and sky, must seem the human creation of evening! Every few days, there was a party at the dining-hall; a band played; others took part in musical chairs while my parents watched; often, classic films were shown. Such an air of celebration – its echo reminds me of similar occasions in my childhood, only I am not present. When I imagine my parents as they were before my birth, it is like encountering those who are both familiar and changed, like recognizing, with sudden pleasure, children who have returned home after many years.

AFTER SHEHNAZ and I had been seeing each other for about a week, I invited her to lunch at my college hall. I waited in front of the lodge, loitering invisibly while people went about, rushing, as they always do, with a special motivated speed at lunchtime. The only thing fixed in that scene was the porter, who sat inside his lodge, in a world a little detached from ours, and ignored me stolidly. When the clock struck one, I began to walk towards the hall, and Shehnaz came from behind and caught up with me, somewhat breathless. We curved round the grassy oval patch together, and entered a looming tunnel and then emerged into the second quad, with a large square of green to our right, and to our left, the L-shaped facade of the old buildings, with their consecutive staircases and rows of neighbourly windows. It must have been a warm day, for Shehnaz was wearing a white cotton top, with a message supporting the Palestinian cause printed boldly upon it, ending in a vivid exclamation mark; I noticed then how small her breasts were, two small bumps beneath her loose top, and how bony and thin she was, her collar bones radiating delicately and symmetrically beneath her neck, their outlines becoming clearer as she bent forward.

The hall had great length and depth, and yet, from the moment one joined the queue collecting trays and food, one failed to see it in perspective. That day I realized, with the disappointment one feels when discovering another person's hidden nature, that Shehnaz was a vegetarian. With a plate full of peas and salad, she stood waiting for me to pay at the till. Feeling ill at ease, we then sat facing each other at one of the interminable parallel

tables that ran from one end of the hall to another. Light filled the transparent sections of the stained-glass windows. Beneath them were portraits of the dead Masters of the college, luminous presences in costume, and beneath the portraits was the table at which the Chinese graduates sat. They looked no older than boys, with straight black hair and clean, animated faces, leaning across to shout to each other in Chinese, drawing back dramatically, or lolling forward, collapsing, and settling a head upon a crooked elbow on the table. In appearance, they were more Westernized than Indians, at ease in their European clothes, industriously devouring steak and kidney pie, but they hardly spoke to the English students, forming a little island at that table at lunchtime, buoyant, and full of movement. They made a domestic noise, like brothers watching a football match on television, with sounds that signified violent disagreement, or native exclamations of astonishment, but they might have been, for all I knew, discussing mathematical formulae or their syllabus. With the Chinese table as our background, Shehnaz and I ate together, more or less silently.

When we came out from the hall, we sat for some time on one of the benches on the edge of the green square, with our backs to the library windows. From there, while we talked, we could see people who had finished lunch appearing both from the hall and the Senior Common Room. Though I was not aware of it then, Mandira's room, which she had newly occupied, was behind us, over our shoulders. I would later become familiar with its rectangular window, whose shutter was lifted on hot days. On the roof above the room, there was a skylight, a narrow glass lid framed by wood, its simple, straight angles standing out against its darker background, and clearly discernible in this brief, summarized version from below. It was by this skylight that I would later identify Mandira's room.

THE ROAD that led to Shehnaz's college passed, at one point, over a canal. Then the road became, for a very tiny distance, a bridge, and one could sit on the wall on one side before entering the college on the left.

The canal had its own life. Ducks climbed curiously on to its bank or paddled upon the water with the utmost seriousness; twigs, branches, and leaves drifted in from the south and travelled northward. Sometimes one saw a rare polythene bag or can in the water, and, occasionally, a pair of tall, unhurried swans also headed towards a destination. Such were the daily journeys on the canal, but once, I saw two men and a woman out on a punt, laughing and shouting, and as I watched from above, the brown tops of their heads, a community of legs, and the interior of the boat with its portioned spaces and shadows became, for a few moments, visible, a glimpse of dark secreties. On the college side, the grassy bank sloped upwards, but on the other side, there was a black wall and the backyards of houses. When one entered the college, and began one's walk towards the rooms, one saw, to the right, across the canal, signs of domesticity seldom seen in these parts of Oxford, with its student flats and old, scholastic buildings, and elsewhere in England mainly from train windows – identical square backyards, each fencing in its peculiar organization of clotheslines, laundry, children, cats, and women, beginning suddenly at one point and ending as suddenly at another.

Shehnaz lived on the first floor of her building, in a room even tinier and more modern than mine. Next to her bed, which during the day served as a sofa, were several shelves with books on history



and politics, a few novels, picture-postcards, and photographs of her family. The books had significant titles on their spines, narrating stories of crises in faraway countries, conjuring the exciting imaginary worlds that graduates inhabit. Yet the global concerns expressed in the titles fitted in quite unremarkably with the marginal life in Shehnaz's room, with its teacups and electric kettle, and with the green, semi-pastoral life in Oxford. Opposite the bed there was a study-table, upon which stood a lamp whose angles were always crooked; beneath it, books lay open upon their backs, with lines marked out in pink and yellow, and next to that, there was a neat pencil box with pens of different colours. The table faced the wall-to-wall glass partition that illuminated every part of the small room on sunny days, and provided a seemingly unlimited view of a wide field receding slowly towards a border of trees. When one sat inside the room and looked out, one had a sense of being surrounded on all sides by space, silence, and greenery. Students in coloured jerseys sometimes played football in that field, radiating in various directions, as they did on that afternoon when Shehnaz lay on her bed and I unbuttoned her shirt. On such brilliant days, unusual birds could be seen running on the field, especially when it was empty and hot and shadowless, and full of its own presence. Along its sides, beautiful English flowers bloomed in clusters, and if one walked there, one encountered small, timid creatures, shy hedgehogs and nervous, preoccupied squirrels. Whenever I looked up that afternoon, I would become aware of the frame of the window, which created an illusory and transparent separation between ourselves and the day outside. It was impossible not to be conscious of nature and sky, not to be surprised at how incidental, like stage-sets, these rooms were, and how specific the human rehearsals within them, of love or social intercourse. Our privacy, carefully constructed in the room, lost its meaning against the background of the glass that continually let in the solitude of that landscape.

THE WALLS in Mandira's room had photographs stuck to them with Blu-tack, and posters of Great Britain, showing the interiors of churches and cathedrals, and pieces of paper that had verses typed upon them. Greeting cards from friends all over the world were arranged upon the mantelpiece, and on the wall opposite, by the window, there was a board to which was pinned an amazing array of scribbled messages, lecture-lists, and printed or handwritten invitations from acquaintances, tutors, college societies, and the students' union. There seemed to be a great crowd of people scattered through the colleges of Oxford with whom Mandira was on first-name terms; later, when her life became more solitary, more nocturnal, and was spent more upon the anxieties we created for ourselves, those letters still stayed pinned to the board, no longer representing her other life outside her room, but a forgetfulness, the dates missed, the events long over, but the lecture-lists and invitation cards remaining upon the board as a beguiling and innocent surface.

In Oxford, the modes of social existence are few but tangible. But the tangibility of this existence – conversing at parties, studying at libraries, going to lectures – is at the same time dream-like. Sometimes the occasions seem like images that one has projected from within for one's own entertainment, until they fade, as they must after a certain hour at night. Night brings darkness, the emptying of the images that made up the day, so that, in the solitary moment before falling asleep, the day, and Oxford, seem to be a dream one is about to remember. At this moment, one knows that one has no existence for others in

Oxford, just as others have no existence for oneself, except in their absence. Daylight and waking bring the feeling of having travelled great distances, of arriving, at last, at a place that is not home, a feeling that cannot be exactly recalled or understood later, but which occurs at the same time each morning, until one gets out of bed, changes into one's trousers and shirt, and leaves the room. To be someone's lover, to share someone's bed, does not help, but only disturbs that fragile configuration of events and meetings, that neutral and desirable intersection of public places and private ambition, that creates the surface of the dream; instead, the moments of solitariness and self-consciousness, such as before sleeping and at waking, begin to recur unexpectedly, interrupting the flow and allocation of time, of schedules, deadlines, and appointments. One begins to get distanced from Oxford; more and more, one sees it as one's own dream, an illusion or vision composed relentlessly of others, but not shared by anyone else. This is in part an effect of knowing that one's relationship with one's lover could have only taken place in Oxford, and has no meaning outside it, and that Oxford itself is a temporal and enchanted territory that has no permanence in one's life.

Mandira lived in a college among undergraduates. The rhythms and inflections, the sounds, were different here from those of graduate life. For one thing, the internationalism of a graduate building was missing; most of the undergraduates were English, and, speaking in accents that belonged to different but neighbouring localities and regions, they formed a kind of family, constantly on the move, opening and closing doors, engaging in interminable exchanges in the corridor, and borrowing each other's provisions. There was an urgency and panic in much of what they did, writing weekly essays and preparing for examinations, and tension exploded either into laughter, or remained unexpressed as silent resentment. Men and women mixed with each other in large, friendly groups, but there was also a subdued

tension between the sexes that came out in their jokes, an undercurrent of signals and hidden priorities that never existed in quite such a way in graduate life. Later, I came to know that many of Mandira's English girlfriends, whom I would sometimes find in her room drinking tea, speaking a rapid language that I hardly followed, were always falling in and out of love with the men on their floor or their staircase, and a conversation with a female friend was only a stop-gap between two sexual moments of anxiety or pleasure. Heartbreak was usual; for about a month, one would see a certain combination of singles and couples on the staircase, the single people in jeans and the couples often dressed in black formal clothes for guest-night; and then the combination would change; the male would disappear, and the woman would return to her plain skirt and woollen jumper. For graduates, there is no real difference between term-time and the breaks in between; and, as most of them come from other continents, home is too far away to go back to; so they stay on in Oxford during the shorter vacations, going to libraries, continuing their research. But the undergraduates keep returning home to the coasts of England, or to the North, or to Wales, in the winter and Easter breaks, home, where, one gathers from their talk, happiness or unhappiness is a more unsurprising, everyday affair than here, home, where one speaks another language, with sister and mother and father; a simple train-journey takes them there, and brings them back, changed somewhat, redder or a little less thin, or with their hair cut much shorter. When they are away, the colleges become monuments, stone passages and stairways, empty halls and gardens, a place that is something between a deserted monastery and an unused bed-and-breakfast guest-house, a world made of Latin inscriptions and dates upon walls, and neatly made beds in rooms with no one in them.

But strange things happen even in term-time. Once, I remember, someone died, a former boyfriend of one of Mandira's friends,

a young man of twenty-one, a 'commoner' of the college; he had died alone in his room, strangely, of a heart attack. At lunchtime, I had seen some students crying, and then, that evening, when Mandira told me the story, the correspondences began to fit. That episode, unknown to most graduates, hung over the college and Mandira's staircase for about a week. It was about at that time that things began between Mandira and myself, without either of us knowing where they would lead to. She would lock her door and come and sit beside me on the bed. If one of her friends happened to knock, and call out, 'Mandira!', we would both be silent; we would listen to the scratching on the notepaper outside, and smile as the person walked away. She wanted very much to make love to me, and at night, after switching off the light, she would lie, small and warm, underneath her blankets. She was completely new to love, unexpectedly bold in her various pleas and demands, and ashamed at the wrong moments. Our blinded gropings were more exploratory than passionate, for both of us were inexperienced, and a little afraid of what was supposed to happen at the end of this act. These were the only moments when we were tolerant of each other's disabilities and shortcomings. Just above the bed there was a skylight that let a glow into the room, so that we could see each other's outlines, and the reassuring shapes of certain objects.

AT THE END OF Cornmarket Street, near the Lloyd's Bank, comes a confluence of four roads, making an irregular sort of cross which one could possibly see from an aircraft. There is no centre in Oxford, only different points of reference, from each of which the conception of the city is altered slightly. Thus one never feels completely rooted, and ascending three floors in a building of the New Bodleian Library gives one, before entering the reading-room, a view of Holywell Street from above. One senses, from that window, how distinct and well marked-out each section of the city is, each partially unknown to the other, each potentially undiscovered to its own inhabitants – for, from above, Holywell Street, with its repetitive up-and-down movement of cyclists and pedestrians, the faint white fringe of its pavement, and the houses on either side appearing quite oddly rearranged from this angle, seems, in the disturbing perspective gained by height and distance, continually strange, a place that will never become familiar or old. The orderly, disappearing line of traffic, the activity on the roads, harmonious and self-dispersing, the unreality of the scene and one's relationship with its unreality, are exposed and encompassed by this view from a third-storey window, which reveals absences between one lane and another, one house and another, untenanted, unexplainable spaces, and that absence over all these, on eye-level with the window, so that the places one has walked through or passed daily lose their known features. It takes something as small and unsuspected as this, a change of view and altitude, to bring one's foreignness to one's self, the feeling of being separated from the routines that one thought attached one

to the city, of being secretly in transit. Similarly, at the junction of four roads at the end of Cornmarket Street, the minor change in gradient of one of the roads, St Aldate's, the way it dips downward, so that the line at its end is known to be a false line, a border concealing and sheltering a second and more distant border at that end of the city, marks, in the midst of everything, an unnoticed but real departure. In a city so little known, so full of such instants, such escapes, events and the memory of events become temporary stays; Shehnaz, Mandira's room, the walks taken together, a meeting with Sharma, reassure one that one has not been in Oxford alone, that one has shared it with others, till the solitary experience of being in transit returns, and friends and acquaintances are borne away by this city, which renews itself, and becomes, once more, strange to oneself. It is the city that remains, a kind of meeting place, modern and without identity, but deceptively archaic, that unobtrusively but restlessly realigns its roundabouts and lanes and landmarks, so that it never becomes one's own, or anyone else's.

The long road adjacent to St Aldate's is the High Street. One of my earliest meetings with Shehnaz was when we ran into each other at the junction, and she was going the opposite way, into High Street, in search of a florist; I hardly knew her then, but on her request, turned back to walk with her. The florist's was closed, so it must have been evening, one of the long, bright evenings of summer. On both sides of this road are ancient colleges, with grey steps and wooden doors and grim, outdated windows, smooth brown stone walls, clock towers and spires. The gong of the clocks, especially the one at the Cornmarket Street end of High Street, can be heard every hour with great and transparent clarity, and at night, when I would hear the ever-increasing repetition from Mandira's room, I would become conscious of the strangeness of the place I was about to fall asleep in, of distance, and the suspension of activity. As one walks past the colleges on High

Street, one glimpses, through the frame of the doorway, another frame, which marks off the end of the entrance area with the porter's lodge, noticeboards, and mail-room, broadening out into the first quad with its empty oval or square of green, its generously enclosed, yet strangely liberated, parameter of open air and space, the facade of a building, with the college chapel, behind the green, and a measured rectangle of sky. This is the abbreviated, painting-like view that passers-by have of the interiors of the colleges, and the rest is hidden behind an edifice of stone that is part history and part fantasy, and has little to do with the domestic or working lives of students, and their particular slang or vernacular. Yet the students do not really matter, because within the college walls there is a world – a geography and a weather – that clings to its own time and definition and is changed by no one. In this world, glimpsed briefly by the passer-by through the open doorway, a certain light and space and greyness of stone, and at night, a certain balance of lamplight, stone, and darkness, co-exist almost eternally, and it is the students, with their nationalities and individual features, their different voices and accents, their different habits and attempts at adjustment, their sense of bathos and possession of reality, who, in truth, vanish, are strangely negated, so that, when the passer-by later remembers what he saw, the students seem blurred, colourful, accidental, even touching, but constantly skirting the edge of his vision, while it is possible to clearly and unequivocally recall the dignity and silence of the doorway and the world beyond it.

A little further on, a short distance before Magdalen Bridge, are the Queen's Lane Coffee Shop and a newsagent's on the left, and the Examination Schools to one's right. On certain days in May and June, examinees in black gowns, at half past twelve and five thirty, trickle out, and then overflow, on to High Street from the entrance of the Schools, the women in black skirts and white shirts, some jubilantly holding bouquets in their hands, the men

in white shirts and black trousers, faces and outlines merging on the pavement and then separating at street-corners, a young man materializing from the crowd and awkwardly crossing the street in the midst of the traffic, sweethearts, their faces flushed with pride and anxiety, waving madly and then embracing, large groups chattering and breaking up, and other smaller groups held close in serious conference. This is one of the few occasions on which one sees something common to all these faces; before one's eyes, for the first time, a network of friendships is formed, correspondences that link acquaintances and strangers in one milling and crowded moment, that is already turning into the past, already disintegrating only to be remembered as something so immediate as not to be wholly real; for no one, later, actually knows what it was like at that moment. Common to each, as they emerge, is the nervous or successful air of opera-singers; for each one has been privileged and chosen by Oxford to perform for it; and now that unique and invigorating moment, for better or for worse, is over. On the other side, life at the newsagent's goes on as before; polite people, such as those one holds the door open for, say 'Thank you' and leave with newspapers and sandwiches. By chance, one might pass them on the street a month later, an encounter that does not bring up a memory or a connection, but something in their place, neither a memory or a connection, which causes one's identity to reconstitute itself. The newsagent's sells postcards of Oxford, small, shining squares with pictures of colleges, hidden lanes, the Radcliffe Camera, and students on bicycles. The postcards are weightless, but palpable, and when one stops to look at them, they have a recognizability that one's consciousness of Oxford lacks; they seem more real than the place one has lived in.

WHEN MY PARENTS moved to that lane in the Christian area in the suburbs of Bombay, I was in Oxford; I did not witness the moving. In the summer, I returned for my vacations to a house I had not seen before, but only read about in letters, a tidy flat on the third floor that was smaller than the flats I had lived in all my life when my father worked in his company.

Once, when I was sleeping late into the morning in my new room, I was woken by an insistent metallic noise, something between a hammering and a ringing. The door at the end of the room opened on to a veranda, and when I went out, I saw a rubbish truck standing in the lane, an old, obsolete truck, such as one always sees on the roads in India, with no roof except in the front, where the driver's seat is. Men who appeared to be dressed only in undergarments – vests and shorts – were clambering busily over the rubbish that had already been piled in the open section of the truck, and were now leaning in a carefree way with their elbows on one side of the truck, and looking out at the lane. The tallest man among them was standing just outside the gate to our building, and with cheeky disregard continually beating a plate with what might have been a spoon. He stood rooted to the spot, and, because he was wearing shorts, I could see how thin his legs were, with hairless knees, bent at a concave angle because of the firmness with which he was standing. The rude noise he was making sent the sweeper-women of the building, pretty girls among them, into a panic; with worried faces, clutching large plastic bins, they were hurrying towards the truck, from which the little men in undergarments were leaning out and looking at them

`Afternoon Raag` is a semi autobiographical novel by Amit Chaudhuri. This is a first-person narration by a student about his days at Oxford. It significantly portrays his casual involvement with two female students, nostalgic memories of his parents staying in India, and his fond recall of the classical music teacher in India. This piece of work by Amit Chaudhuri is loosely structured like a Hindustani `raag`. And because of this reason this book`s prose part has gained the vigor and has the poetic feel as well.

Amit Chaudhuri was born in Calcutta in the year of 1962. He brought up in Bombay. He graduated from University College, London, and was a research student at Balliol College, Oxford. He was later Creative Arts Fellow at Wolfson College, Oxford, and received the Harper Wood Studentship for English Literature and Poetry from St John`s College, Cambridge as well. He has contributed fiction, poetry and reviews to numerous publications including The Guardian, the London Review of Books, the Times Literary Supplement, the New Yorker and Granta magazine. Till date the author has written four novels, a book of short stories, and edited the Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature. The Clarendon Press, Oxford, recently published D. H. Lawrence and `Difference`, his study of D.H. Lawrence`s poetry and critical theory. He has been translated into several languages and has won the Betty Trask Award, the Commonwealth Writers Prize, the Encore Prize, the Southern Arts Literature Prize, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction, and also the Sahitya Akademi award. He is also a vocalist in the North Indian classical tradition.

#### Synopsis:

The delight of Amit Chaudhuri`s `Afternoon Raag` comes from his ability to render mental landscapes in a tight indirect prose. This is a poetic expression of the author. His idea of the novel as a collection of poetic reflections is also displayed in his sensitivity to minute detail. It also shows his ability to transform the seemingly insignificant into the matter of intense reflection. `Afternoon Raag` deals with the experiences and impressions of a young Indian student of English Literature at the university of Oxford. Chaudhuri recreates the state of mind of a young man coming to terms with loneliness, nostalgia and alienation in a unique way. A raag is a piece of classical Indian music, which plays around a set of specific intervals to create a particular mood. Here the mood recreated is one of being adrift in a unique situation, enjoying a very special phase of life between childhood and adult life, devoted to ephemeral, yet significant relationships and aesthetic pursuits.

“Afternoon Raag, by Amit Chaudhuri”, Url: [http://www.indianetzone.com/17/afternoon\\_raag\\_amit\\_chaudhuri.htm](http://www.indianetzone.com/17/afternoon_raag_amit_chaudhuri.htm), access: 30/03/2012.