

Cultural Awareness in Nirad C. Chaudhuri's *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*

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DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2020.5.4.05

Abstract

The early part of the nineteenth century, the Indian cultural movement reached its climax and then began to break up. The sign of decay starts to come in perception in the years between 1916 and 1948. So the first hand sense of build up modern Indian culture started by the great Bengali reformers like Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Raja Ram Mohun Roy, Swami Vivekananda and Rabindra Nath Tagore. In the beginning of twentieth century, the attempt of these social reformers created a sense of literary, humanistic, religious and ethical values of Indian culture. After the independence, Chaudhuri confirms that the attempt of them made the sense of cultural equality. The native culture realized that it should not imitate the traits of the alien culture any longer and began to cleanse itself of the contamination by the alien culture. But Chaudhuri observes that Hinduism and Indian culture has supernatural sense and it should be modify reasonably to make rich the ethical values. The literary works of Nirad C. Chaudhuri have generally presented him to be an anti-Indian writer. He considered as a

communicator of the complexity of his native culture, embodies newness and describe the colonies as exotic perspective. This essay studies Nirad C. Chaudhuri's attempt to write the output of Indian culture through an autobiographical non-fiction *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* establishing his views and position detached from his countrymen. Here he expresses his views regarding the West and the East from a self-detached point of view. The critics and literary personalities related to him believe that he is a social observer more than a social writer. In this book, he gives an account of cultural, religious, and political aspect of society. In this paper, we will study how much relevant the book in respect of Indian cultural ethos.

Keywords- Culture, British, East-west, Anti-Indian, Emancipation

Nirad Chaudhuri's maiden book *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951) admits that the autobiographer was not a known personality. The book is strange in many ways. First, it covers the first twenty-three years of the autobiographer's life although he was fifty-three years old at the time of its publication. The second strangeness of the autobiography is that it is not wholly autobiographical, but it is partly historical. In this book, he advocated that the span British Empire in India as more a regenerative era than an exploitative one. He felt that Britain had sped up rather than slowed down India's social, culture and material progress. Hence, he expressed the 'gratitude' on behalf of all Indians. He dedicated his book to the memory of British imperialism.

Nirad C. Chaudhuri published his memoir, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951) with Macmillan. During the publication of this book, he was working in All India Radio in New Delhi. There are certain tendencies like his sense of place, his humors

and his judgments of colonial empire is best part of the book. The book embodies an impassioned detail description of the conditions in which an Indian grew to manhood in the early decades of the twentieth century. Nirad C. Chaudhuri's personal life and experiences have also been presented in his books with Indian culture. *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* tells the story of the early period of Nirad C. Chaudhuri's life and the condition in which an Indian grew into manhood in the early decades of this century. Though this book Chaudhuri presents and interprets the history of India and establishes his critical insight related to Indian society, politics and culture. His self-Westernization remained static part of his critical insight. His self Westernization is his sharp and merciless views of post-Independent India. He progressively subscribed to an art of prolepsis to justify his point. The book is an Indian's self portrait, mirroring the tortured spirit who embraced in his life uniquely. It embodies the perspectives of the author along with the truth and clarity of his thought. It presents us coherent and imaginative portrayal of India's history and cultural perspectives.

Chaudhuri believes in Nehruvian secularism and motto of India's development that 'unity in diversity of India'. He believes that it is power of Indian people that forced the British to consider the Indians with an attitude of esteem and honour. Indian civilization and culture is a history of past achievements endowed with multi-racial and multi-lingual ethos. Since his early college days, he was fascinated with history and Indianess. The book is the author's verdict on the British Raj as well as an attack of the Indians practicing poor mimicry of the notion of Western materialistic culture whom Bhabha has described as 'mimic men'. The book being a product of the contemporary society has sufficient material for socio-cultural study. In this connection, a writer has explained the existed relationship between

'man' and 'society', and described at length the socio-cultural relationship. It is clear that Chaudhuri has used this autobiographical work to express his personal experience of native culture and the culture of colonial British Empire. The intention of him is clear with a quotation from C.E.M. Joad:

Not only is man a being who only attains his real nature in society; He is a being, who has always lived in some form or other of society, even if his earliest society was only that of the family group (36-37).

In the book, Chaudhuri divides the entire span of Indian civilization into Indo-Aryan, IndoIslamic and Indo-European periods and establishes the fact that Indian civilization in all the three periods. He presents the supremacy of Western culture thus:

....the civilizations have remained essentially foreign even at the highest point of their development within India and have ceased to be living as soon as they have been cut off from the source,...neither political order nor civilization has come into being in India when a powerful external force has not been in possession of the country....either the United States singly or a combination of the United States and the British Commonwealth to re-establish and rejuvenate the foreign domination of India' (The Autobiography 519).

Chaudhuri takes the reference of William Shakespeare, John Webster, Charles Lamb and Jane Austen for a comparative study. On the one hand, he has a great love for the Bengali literature and the other hand he admires Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who argues for English education in India from 1823. He admires Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Swami Vivekananda due to their objective criticism of the conservative Hindu culture. He is a man who talking to men about ideas on

religion and politics. In 1951, Raymond Mortimer in his critical work *The Square Peg* has commented on views of Mr. Chaudhuri thus:

If Mr Chaudhuri sees nothing good in his country do not imagine that he is indulgent to the English. He speaks with loathing of our superciliousness, cruelty and despotism in the days of the Raj; he is equally severe upon those English who now – always from the lowest motive – express sympathy with India (“The Square Peg” 3).

M. K. Naik has a clear opinion about that Chaudhuri cannot be evaluated as an ‘anti – Indian’ because he has no interested ambition to attract with the English in India. Chaudhuri has condemned Indian society when he states:

that the Hindu civilisation was created by a people who were actively conscious of their fair complexion in contrast to the dark skin. Their greatest preoccupation was how to maintain the pristine purity of the blood-stream which carried this colour. The Hindu regards himself as heir to the oldest conscious tradition of superior colour and the carrier of the purest and most exclusive stream of blood. When with this consciousness and pride he encounters a despised Micchchha, an unclean foreigner, with a complexion fairer than his, his whole being is outraged. The creature tries to console himself with the illusion that if in this world there is a foreigner fairer than him, it is only because that foreigner is a leper (The Autobiography 129, 130)

Though Chaudhuri had a special attraction for the beauty which is associated with English life but he could never think of England as he had perceived of Bengal and of India. He has presented the Indianization of his text books that are in English for it is an easy comprehension for the Indian masses. He

paradoxically comments on imperial power that the British falls from its glory due to ‘the bankruptcy of European civilization. It has spiritual poverty and moral weakness. Chaudhuri observes the culture and tradition of Hindus adoring fair complexion and disdain dark complexion. However, he takes interest in the conflict of foreigners like *Mlechchha* (the whites), who are fair and have humiliated by native dark people because of cultural crisis. According to the social decurum the male friends were received only at the front rooms, whereas the female friends were allowed into kitchens and bedrooms. Chaudhuri’s keen observation makes proves that there he takes keen interest in the evaluation of social and cultural life of Indian, especially Bengalis. The most part of the book, he seems to be writing for a foreign audience who are not familiar with the culture and manners of Hindu.

Finally, Chaudhuri’s presentation of Indian culture as a dying culture and it has become stagnant due to the lack of dynamic nature. This statement proves him debunk the Hindu culture. He is of the opinion that all Indian people endeavors in imitating the West and its way of living life accepting as a great culture. His thought in *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* summarizes Indian history as consisting of three cycles. These cycles makes strong and creative Indian culture through foreign influence provided by a primary motive force as the mid-European Aryan, the Muslim and the British respectively. He presents his respect for British way of living life which he found lacking in Indian civilization. He, as a colonial one, feels a great need to dissociate one’s own self from the amicable nature and concentrate upon the personal achievement before disturbing the authority for others. He involves himself stating honest dialogues with his own undeveloped society. William Walsh considers that The *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* as one

of the finest examples of this genre to appear in English in this century and the most significant work to be written by the love and hate of Indian-British relationship (Indian Literature in English 45).

An Autobiography of an Unknown Indian is an affirmation of the author's individual self. It provides a description of a culture seen through the personal view. The author has justified in designating his work more as descriptive ethnology than an autobiography. In *Thy Hand: Great Anarch* Chaudhuri states the aim of his first book *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*. In spite of its title, the book was not truly an autobiography but it is a historical picture of struggle of civilization and society in which he was born and grew up. He is quite clear about his purpose in writing his first book:

The story I want to tell is the story of the struggle of a civilization with a hostile environment, in which the destiny of the British Empire in India became necessarily involved. My main intention is thus historical, and since I have written the account with the utmost honesty and accuracy of which I am capable, the intention in my mind has become mingled with the hope that the book may be regarded as a contribution to contemporary history. (p.9)

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