

Music as Narrative: Amit Chaudhuri's a Strange and Sublime Address and Namita Devidayal's the Music Room

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Abstract

The universe of Indian classical music is a very well constructed one. There are definite structure of a *Raga* and a very clear instruction on the performance. Amit Chaudhuri and Namita Devidayal are the two writers in the genre of Indian Writing in English who has formal training in Indian classical music and they perform at a professional level regularly. This paper aims to show how Indian classical music has influenced these two writers subtly and the structure of a *Raga* has infiltrated into the structure of their debutant novels, *A Strange and Sublime Address* of Amit Chaudhuri and *The Music Room* of Namita Devidayal . Though there is no direct reference of music in *A Strange and Sublime Address*, Chaudhuri follows, among many characteristics, the sonant-consonant note structure of a *Raga* on various levels. Moreover, he aims to create an ambience of a microcosmic universe through his writing, the same purpose a *Raga* serves. Namita Devidayal on the other hand constructed the novel in the shape of a *Khayal* rendition where the time sequence, characterization and plot structure moves in a circular way.

Keywords: Indian classical music – narrative structure - *Raga* – *Vadi Samvadi* – *Gharana* – *Alaap Jod Jhala* – microcosmic universe – *Khayal*

The genre of Indian Writing in English has prolific writers who otherwise belong to various professional fields. Though most of them are essentially men of letters, there are university professors (A. K. Ramanujan), practicing lawyer and Indian Foreign Service cadre (Khushwant Singh), once journalist and a professor of contemporary literature (Amitav Ghosh), a short time bank worker (Rohinton Mistry) any many more.

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It has often been observed that the professional curiosity has infiltrated into the writing of an author in a subtle way. However, when we look at the entire oeuvre of Indian Writing in English, we get a handful of writers who has inclination towards music. Among them, Amit Chaudhuri and more recently Namita Devidayal are the two writers who have received regular serious training of Indian Classical Music. Both of them, despite their professional preoccupations (as Amit Chaudhuri is a professor of contemporary literature at the University of East Anglia and Namita Devidayal is a journalist with Times of India) give vocal performances at a professional level regularly.

When these two writers ventured into the realm of fictional prose for the first time, Indian classical music was more than an influence on them; rather it subtly moulded the structure of the novel. In Amit Chaidhuri's case, it is *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991) and Namita Devidayal's first novel is *The Music Room* (2007).

Amit Chaudhuri has learnt North Indian classical music from late Pandit Govind Prasad Jaipurwale of the Kunwar Shyam Gharana (1) and was also guided in Hindustani music by Pandit A. Kanan. To quote his official Website, "Amit Chaudhuri is a trained and classically acclaimed singer in the north Indian classical tradition; he has received high praise for his singing from various newspapers and journals, including the *Times of India*, the *Hindustan Times*, *Ananda Bazar Patrika* and *India Today*." (Chaudhuri, official website, profile). Chaudhuri himself writes in his book *Telling Tales*, "...by the time I reached London, (2) my musical propensities has taken an unexpected turn : I'd discovered the beauty and difficulty of Indian classical vocal music, and began an arduous regime of training." (256). Not only that, in an interview published in *The Hindu* Amit Chaudhuri asserted, "I experienced my 'Indianness' as something that expressed itself powerfully through Hindustani classical music." (*The Hindu*, December, 25- 2010). All these were happening to him when he was writing *A Strange and Sublime Address*. In another interview published in *India International Centre Quarterly*, Chaudhuri told to Anita Roy:

When I started writing my first novel on 1986, just five years after *Midnight's Children* was published,...I was myself trying to escape from other forms— the whole burden of absurdist and existentialist discourse which was such a big thing in '70s, creating prisms through which one saw everything.(Roy, "A Conversation With Amit Chaudhuri". *India International Centre Quarterly*, 153)

So Chaudhuri had to look for another forms of narrative structure. Music, especially Indian classical music was definitely his forte and he was quite sure of his ability. Chaudhuri later writes in *Telling Tales* :

When I think of how I make my daily journey from writing to music, and back again (Which, in a sense, I'm enacting at the moment), I grope for analogies. It is not a question of being able to 'do' various things. I can cite two roughly analogous activities: global travel (which has defined my life for about thirty years); and writing bilingually." (257).

As for Namita Devidayal, she had had the privilege of learning music from 'gauranjogini' Smt Dhondutai Kulkarni and to become a part of the exquisite lineage of the famous and one of the oldest of the *Gharanas*, *Jaipur-Atrauli Gharana*. Dhondutai, who is a singer of her own stature, learnt from Ustad Natthan Khan, Ustad Manji Khan and Ustad Bhurji Khan (sons of Ustad Alladiya Khan, the founder of the *Gharana*. She is also the sole disciple of legendary Smt Kesarbai karkar. *The Music Room* (2007) is an account of Devidayal's life-long traditional and rather unconventional 'guru-shisya' relationship and musical journey with Dhondutai Kulkarni that expands for not less than three decades. In her own words, "I think the book was a coming together of my two greatest passions – music and writing" (Tiwari, *Mirror*, Sept. 30, 2007). Because the world of art is "a very difficult, very painful world" (Ibid.) as, she clarifies, "it demands tremendous dedication. And I really didn't have it in me. To me, this book is, in a way, my tribute to what I wasn't able to do musically." (Someshwar, Pain and Struggle, *rediff news*, September 20, 2007). As far as the structure of the novel is concerned, Devidayal herself admitted in a rather amused way, "The funny thing is that the structure of the book unwittingly ended up being like a khayal rendition— lovely detours which always come back to the *sama* or point of beginning in the table cycle" (Tiwari, *Mirror*, Sept.30, 2007).

From his very first novel, Amit Chaudhuri has secured a distinguished position in terms of narrative technique. Much has been said about the lyrical quality of his prose.

Prof. S.B. Shukla and Anu Shukla writes in, *The Novels of Amit Chaudhuri: An Exploration in the Alternative Tradition*, "he becomes lyrical rather than specific or realistic" (Shukla, 4). He has been famously termed as the master of miniature by the critics.

Chaudhuri himself commented in the introduction of *Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*, “Post-Rushdie, the Indian novel in English has been constructed, in both popular and critical terms, as something distinct from— indeed, as an alternative to – the conventional English novel.” (Chaudhuri, 2001, Introduction XXV). Standing aside from the ‘robustly extroverted’ (Chaudhuri’s term, Introduction XXV.) style of Rushdie and most of the Post-Rushdie Indian novelists in English, Chaudhuri’s novels can be termed as ‘fiction of sensibility’. (Dhar, “Amit Chaudhuri and the Fiction of Sensibility”, Shukla, 38).

Amit Chaudhuri’s first novel *‘A Strange and Sublime Address’* (1991) is the story of young Sandeep and his two visits (with a gap of one and half year between them) to his Chhotomama’s (maternal uncle) house in Southern part of Calcutta (Calcutta then, now Kolkata) from Bombay (not Mumbai, again). These visits are source of immense pleasure to him as he spends the entire time playing and enjoying with his two cousins, Abhi and Babla. Through these visits, he gets acquainted with the universe of the adults and with the Bengali culture in his own childish ways. The ambience of the house and its surroundings is definitely very different from the high-rise apartment he lives in Bombay. During their second visit, Chhotomama had two consecutive heart attacks, which he eventually survived. The story ends when the doctor was about to release Chhotomama from hospital and the boys were playing at the garden adjacent to the hospital and were looking for a ‘kokil’ bird. Though there is not much reference to any *Raga* in this novel [except once towards the end of the novel where Sandeep is coming back from the hospital with his family and *Raga Bhairavi* or *Shankara* is being played in *Shehnai* at a marriage hall.(116)], the structure of *A Strange and Sublime Address* subtly follows the structure of a *Raga*.

The first and foremost function of a *Raga* is to create an ambience, a particular mood. It is also well accepted that a particular *Raga* evokes or represents particular season (i.e. all the *Ragas* of *Malhar* group are played for Rainy season or *Raga Basanta* is for Spring.) There are also definite directions about which *Raga* can be played at a certain *Prabar* (Part of the day), i.e. *Bhairavi* is a morning *Raga* that is supposed to be played at dawn or evoke a feeling of dawn into the audience.(3)

Now in *A Strange and Sublime Address* Chaudhuri is very particular about providing a minute and often microcosmic description of a particular season or part of the day. A sudden splash of rain comes after long hot summer days. Chaudhuri describes :

On Saturday, a cool breeze surprised them. It smelled of wet earth, sodden leaves. It had rained somewhere in the villages, in the groves and fields, and the breeze had travelled to this lane, bringing news of rain from the far-off place of its beginnings. They had congregated after lunch on the double bed on the second storey, when it ran its fingers down their backs, making them break out in goose-flesh. There was something erotic about the first breeze that brought the monsoons. (66)

Then again he goes on: it was the most beautiful movement seen on this rainy day. Crows hopped alertly. They sensed a presence, powerful and dangerous, though they could see nothing or no one. The nervous toy like city was set against the dignified advance of the clouds, as if two worlds were colliding. There was an end-of-the-world atmosphere. (67).

Midday is the favourite part of the day to Chaudhuri. The description of noontime household, the interplay of light and shadow, the heat, come repeatedly in this novel:

Between two and four o'clock, a golden stupor descended upon the city. Sandeep loved these two hours when it was too hot to move, when the eddying waves of people disappeared and a low tide came upon everything, leaving lane after lane like gullies in the sand and house after house like sandcastles upon an empty beach, when the splendid arguments in the tea-shops come to a brief conclusion, and everyone agreed with everyone and fell silent. (88-89).

Prof. Subir Dhar commented in his essay *A Strange and Sublime Address and fiction of sensibility*:

In this, in Chaudhuri's organization of experience, one issue seems to be of some significance—and that is the novelist's training and accomplishment as a musician. An acute ear for sounds is indeed a unique gift that the writer of *A Strange and Sublime Address* possesses in great measure. It is evident at the microlevel of textual practice that Chaudhuri's narrative is replete with sounds and sound effects. (Shukla, 42).

These sounds, smells, visuals definitely enlivens the ambience, create a specific atmosphere around, the effect a *Raga* intends to create.

As a master executioner introduces the major notes of a *Raga* through *Alaap*, Chaudhuri introduces the major characters and settings of the novel through Sandeep.(4) As soon as the ‘morning passed in a wave of words’ (Chaudhuri, *Strange and Sublime*, 9) we all get settled along with Sandeep who ‘gradually adjusted his senses to Chhotomama’s house, to the pale walls, the spider-webs in the corners, the tranquil bedsheets on the old beds, the portraits of grandfathers and grandmothers’(ibid.) and so on. As the plot moves forward, various characters, mostly relatives like Sonamama, Chhordimoni— they come and go, sometimes one at a time, sometimes together. It is always the various permutations and combination of these known faces that decides the course of action in the novel. On certain mornings or evenings the family members, especially women plan to venture to New Market or visit some relative who live in the suburbs. All these movements of characters and incidents look so much like the *Barhat* or *Vistaar* part of a *Raga* where the interplay of some previously known notes create magic and move the *Raga* forward to the climax where the notes run fastest. In a conversation with Sumana R. Ghosh ,included in *The Novels of Amit Chaudhuri: An Exploration in the Alternative Tradition* Chaudhuri says, “ I had in mind music where every note has its place, and there are octaves and semisharps and flats and I thought that this world of relatives’ names in Bengali is much like the system of music and music is a language.” (Shukla, 165)

The climax of the novel comes with the heart attack of Chhotomama. The tension rises to the pinnacle. Like the *Jhala* part of an instrumental performance where the artist creates a swift trajectory of melody with all the available notes, all the characters run to and fro, actions take place in quick succession. Chaudhuri describes:

He roared now, and the shirt tore in his hands with a long hissing sound. Then he was silent the comb dropped to the ground, but did not break, and Saraswati rushed forward, her white sari falling around her like a lowered flag. She called out for Mamima. The sound of the conch, the rich, powerful sound, born of human breath that had such conviction it seemed the walls of the house would collapse, and the ringing of the bell, the heart of music at the centre of prayer, stopped abruptly. In the distance, there was a sound of a plate being upset or overturned, and the soft, hurrying patter of bare feet. At an even greater distance, on the horizon of hearing, a car blew its horn again and again in the lane. (101)

But Chhotomama did not die and after a brief period of crisis, everything was becoming normal and was falling into places where the novel ends. As if a master performer is ending his performance in the same way he began, indicating the eternal flow of melody goes on in this universe and will go on.

In the same interview with Sumana R. Ghosh Chaudhuri said that he was rather interested in “the comings and goings of different world within one world” (165). A *Raga* is a combination of one ‘sonant’ or dominant note that is *Vadi* and a consonant note (*Samvadi*).⁽⁵⁾ In the case of *A Strange and Sublime Address*, there are two worlds, the prominent world of Chhotomama’s house in Calcutta and the obscure but unavoidably present world of Sandeep’s apartment in Bombay. If Calcutta is *Vadi swara*, Bombay definitely plays the role of *Samvadi swara*.

Amit Chaudhuri has often been marked for his minute detailing of a scene. With his exquisite power of observation, he creates a universe of his own in a miniature form with apparently insignificant visuals like a house cleaner dusting the floor, “She would sweep the floor— unending expanses, acres and acres of floor— with a short broom called the *jhadu*, swiping away the dust in an arc with its long tail which reminded one of the drooping tail of some nameless, exotic bird.” (15). His attention to every detail is like a master executioner who is playing small portions of a *Raga*, where he creates a whole universe of its own with beautiful presentation of the limited notes available to him.

Every *Raga* is constituted of certain notes that becomes its identification (*Pebchan*). They work as refrain and come back again and again. The rhythmic structure of a *Raga* also moves in a circular way. After the completion of each rhythmic cycle, the performer and the *Tabla* player meet to a pause in a perfect precision, which is called ‘*Sama*’. In *A Strange and Sublime Address* we can see some images and situations are used repeatedly. They are somehow Chaudhuri’s leitmotif (6). The image of men women of the house taking an afternoon siesta seems to be particularly favourite to Chaudhuri. He describes:

In the afternoon, drugged by an alternation of soporific heat and coolness, light and shade, Sandeep’s aunt and his mother fell asleep.

The magazines they had been reading lay open—one on the recipe page, and one on the story of unrequited love—on their faces; there, the fluttered like wings with every exhalation of breath. (41).

Scenes similar to this are repeated at least three more times (82, 84 & 90). Other imageries like the children and adults taking bath (10, 28, 93 & 96) or pigeons making a trajectory with their flying routes (15 & 42) or the family are gathering for their meal or afternoon tea (23, 37, 97) are described with intimate detailing. This feature undoubtedly looks like the movement of a *Raga* where certain notes are repeated at a certain interval and one cycle of *Tabla* is completed.

The Music Room is the story of Namita Devidayal herself, how a rather reluctant girl was driven into the world of Indian classical music and how it became the source of peace and salvation to her.

An attentive probe into the method of characterization would reveal that the *Vadi-Samvadi* structure of a *Raga* is maintained at various levels. If Dhondutai is considered as the ‘sonant’ note or *Vadi* note who remains dominant with her presence throughout the narrative, Namita is definitely the *Samvadi* note because without her presence most of the situation would have remained incomplete. Though she is very conscious about her position, as she told in the interview, “I’ve tried to be just a narrator, the *Sutradhar*, through the book”. (Someshwar, “Pain and Struggle”, *rediff news*, September 20, 2007). But when Dhondutai plays the role of the storyteller and speaks about her learning days, she becomes the minor note and all her *Gurus* stand dominant with their magnanimous stature.

The Music Room is also the story of coming together of two worlds, ‘a very cosmopolitan, Westernised, English-speaking, dilettante world’ (Someshwar, “Pain and Struggle”, *rediff news*, September 20, 2007) in which Namita grew up and the traditional world of Dhondutai where ‘it was just her music. That was it. There was nothing else.’(Someshwar, “Pain and Struggle”, *rediff news*, September 20, 2007.). These two worlds, like the two worlds of Sandeep in *A Strange and Sublime Address* plays the role of *Vadi* note and *Samvadi* note alternatively. As the novel progresses, Namita’s world goes through various changes, both physically and emotionally, but like the sonant note, Dhondutai’s world remains static.

Both Dhondutai Kulkarni and Namita Devidayal are the representatives of *Jaipur-Atrauli Gharana*.

Two major singing styles seem to have applied in the narrative technique of this novel. Firstly, unlike other *Gharanas*, in this Gharana the ‘notes are applied in an oblique manner with filigree involving immediately neighboring notes.

Instead of flat taan, gamak (taan sung with double notes with a delicate force behind each of the component double-notes of the taan) makes the taan spiral into seemingly never-ending cycles.’(Gharana, Wikipedia, cited on 24/03/14). So, it appears that the in between half notes (*Shruti*) plays a very important role in the singing style of this *Gharana*. Devidayal in her novel also leaves ample scope for various issues lying underneath the mainframe of the story, like, the crisis of an artist, the crisis of women in art, the social status of a performing woman in a bygone era and last but not the least, the cities of Bombay and Kolahpur which are much more important than just a backdrop. They are living entities who play vital role in various occasions.

Secondly, Devidayal keeps her story moving ‘back and forth in time’. (Someshwar, “Pain and Struggle”, rediff news, September 20, 2007). And through the course of the novel, shifting of focus from herself to Dhondutai or to the exponents like Alladiya Khan or Kesarbai is frequent. This style follows another quality of *Jaipur-Atrauli Gharana*, the use of *Jod-Ragas*. (Mixed or hybrid *Raga*; a blend of multiple *Ragas* that form one *Raga*.) Devidayal went on explaining in the same interview, “Later I realized that’s how oral tradition pass on. It’s like some little secret Dhondutai was teaching me that Alladiya Khan must have taught Kesarbai a 100 years ago....The book is also written in that way”.(Someshwar, “Pain and Struggle”, *rediff news*, September 20, 2007). Moreover, almost every time a story starts from learning a *Raga* at Dhondutai’s house and goes to the past, to Dhondutai’s own musical experiences and after travelling a large sphere in time and place return through a completely different path to the music room again. The structure is just like a *Raga* performance where the performer goes up in the octave (*Arohana*) and travels back (*Avarohana*) in a different way to *Sama*.(7)

Thus, the lesson goes on. Namita faces various problems in her personal life and finally gets the opportunity to offer her song to Mahalaxmi at the Mahalaxmi temple at Kolahpur where Alladiya Khan used to perform.

The execution of the *Raga* at that very place brought a sense of completeness to her. As if, her life comes to a full circle. And the music keeps flowing through their lives.

Many theories have been proposed on what should be the narrative style of an author in a post-modern age or from a post-colonial standpoint.

Some critics have identified Amit Chaudhuri's narrative style as a reaction to post-Rushdie 'national narrative' (Majumdar, *That Time That Place*, Shukla,19) in Indian English Literature, which Chaudhuri has accepted by turn. Devidayal, on the other hand quite frankly said, "the whole book just flowed out of me." (Someshwar, "Pain and Struggle", *rediff news*, September 20, 2007). Both of the writers seem to be so engrossed in their musical world that they hardly bother about these theorizations about writing. All they intend to do is to capture, as Chaudhuri himself said in *A Strange and Sublime Address* the silent music that is unheard to all in the world and present them with all their fullness and beauty and melody to the readers, in this case may be they are the audience too.

Notes

1. Gharana: In Hindustani music, a *gharānā* is a system of social organization linking musicians or dancers by lineage or apprenticeship, and by adherence to a particular musical style. A gharana also indicates a comprehensive musicological ideology. This ideology sometimes changes substantially from one gharana to another. It directly affects the thinking, teaching, performance and appreciation of music.

The word gharana comes from the Hindi word 'ghar', which means 'family' or 'house'. It typically refers to the place where the musical ideology originated; for example, some of the gharanas well known for singing khyals are: Agra, Gwalior, Indore, Jaipur, Kirana, and Patiala. (Wikipedia, cited on 24.03.2014).

2. Chaudhuri went to England in 1983, as he writes in *Interlude, Telling Tales: selected writings 1993-2013*, "In 1984, my parents moved to a small, appealing flat in St Cyril Road, Bandra. My father had retired from his corporate position – as the head of a company- the previous year: the year I'd gone to England as an undergraduate." (241)

3. In his book *The Ragas of North India* Walter Kaufmann defines *raga* as one of the melodic modes used in Indian classical music. It is, he says, "a combination of tones which, with beautiful illuminating graces pleases the people in general" (41). If we go back to the etymological root, the word *raga* in Sanskrit means the act of colouring or dying which metaphorically leads to the suggestion of evocation of various emotions like passion, affection, sympathy etc. within the performer and subsequent transmutation of the emotions into the audience.

4. Both in vocal and instrumental performances, a *Raga* starts with an '*Alaap*', which introduces the *Raga*, its key notes and characteristic features to the audience. Then in vocal performance, there is '*Barhat*' or '*Vistaar*' which is the expansion of the *Alaap* that explores the potentiality of the *Raga*. Though there are differences in execution of a *Raga* among various '*Gharana*'s (schools) of Indian classical music, but generally there is a mild exchange with the *Tabla* in this part with which the rhythm scheme of the *Raga* is established.

This part is known as *Layakari* (playing with the rhythm). And finally there is *Taankari*, the fullest exposition of all the possible permutation combination of all the notes in the fastest tempo that brings the climax of the *Raga*. In case of instrumental performance, it is *Alaap*, *Jod* (the bridge between the exposition and the climax) and *Jhala* (the climax). These portions play the same role of exfoliating the fullest beauty of a *Raga*.

5. There are two types of notes in a *raga*, as Debabrata Dutta writes in his book *Sangeet Tatva*, "A note that is used more frequently in a *Raga* than any other note is referred as *Vadi* note or the sonant or dominant note. As the *vadi* note of *Raga Iman* and *Bhupali* is '*ga*'".(37) (Translation mine). There is another strong note at fourth or fifth from the *vadi* note which is called *Samvadi* or consonant note. But there is not always perfect agreement about which note-pair to designate as sonant-consonant in a given *raga*.

6 The *Oxford Dictionary of literary Terms* by Chris Baldick says a leitmotif is 'A frequently repeated phrase, image, symbol or situation in a literary work, the recurrence of which usually indicates or supports a theme. The term (German, 'leading motif') comes from music criticism, where it was first used to describe the repeated musical themes or phrases that Wagner linked with particular characters and ideas in his operatic works.' (Baldick,2008,p.185)

7. The most definitive characteristic pattern of a *raga* its ascending- descending (*aroha-avaroha*) order, that runs from middle '*sa*' to high '*sa*'. The notes may be in straight sequence or in oblique zigzag (*vakra*) pattern, or more often, a combination of both. (*musicinworldinstruments.com* cited on 23/04/2014).

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Namita Devidayalâ€™s *The Music Room* (St. Martinâ€™s Press, New York, 2009) belongs to the latter sort. It is history told to perfection in the style of a fictional tale. You could perhaps best describe it as an enchanting, almost seductive, personal narrative encrusted with details recalled with care and love. In the process of telling the life story of her music teacher, the author skilfully weaves in the history of Hindustani classical music with panache and an eye for exactitude in the many sub-narratives she offers. Iâ€™m a bit puzzled, though, by an obvious slip in this regard when she describe