

essay

Eluding Circe: Nirad Choudhuri's Futile Attempt

by Fazlul Alam

I FIRST HEARD OF N C CHOUDHURI in the sixties. At that time, the *Encounter* was a sort of ID card for the intellectuals in Dhaka. I tried to follow some members of my peer group by occasionally carrying one (usually the same issue all through a year). 'A Passage to England' by N C Choudhuri in one issue of that magazine interested me and at that time I thought that this was an exceptionally brilliant title and the article must have offered a well juxtaposed view against EM Forster's *A Passage to India*. Now having read N C Choudhuri's further exposition of himself, I find that both of them reflect the same philosophy that the imperial power and the subjugated class can at best touch each other fleetingly, nothing really 'connects' between the two.

We the literate people of the Indian sub-continent read N C Choudhuri with envy. He has made it. Not by his near completing a century, but by his literary output and recognition in the western world. This recognition does not mean that he is a best-seller, but that a reputable British publisher publishes his books and that the British Monarchy has showered on him an Member of British Empire (MBE) title. Of course, such titles as OBEs, Order of British Empire and MBEs are now the properties of many Bangalees living in Britain, and can soon become a dusty item behind the glass or on the fire-place mantle, but one has to judge each award on its merit. N C Choudhuri's award is different because he is the only living Bangalee writer to possess the MBE. He received this after a much advertised reprint of his earlier *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*.

Choudhuri's Grand View: Key to his Success

What, then, is his central theme or the grand view that has enabled him to have made it? I think that his linguistic abilities in English, his clarity of vision, his love of sophistication in daily life, his criticism of Indian barbarism and above all, his hatred for socialism have earned him a place in the western world. I also feel that as he picked up his pen to write books at the age of fifty-seven, he was already ripe in his views to be able to impress the world powers (excluding Soviet Union of his time) by telling what they wanted to hear from an 'unknown Indian'. Getting his article published in *The Encounter* was surely the beginning of his contact with those powers whom we call 'reactionary forces' since that magazine was found to have been financed by the CIA.

Nearly twenty years after I first read him in Dhaka, I came across him again in a public library in England where the only copy of *The Continent of Circe* (1965) by this 'unknown Indian' was

being discarded because it was issued only once in ten years. I asked to keep it to myself instead of sending it for pulping. The book, according to him, is an essay on the peoples of India. I was indeed fascinated by this writer and his style, not so much by what he wrote, possibly because I could not agree and I found many of his 'scholarly findings' as too sweeping, biased, unresearched and ideological. To cite a few quotations might convince some readers to agree with me. He writes about the nature of the Indians, "Among us, Indians, cannibalism, in a manner of speaking, is the product, not of the savage state, but of the civilized." Immediately after such a pronouncement, he agrees with a Muslim view that the world can be divided into "two contrasting halves of a *Dar-al-Islam*, a land of peace, and a *Dar-al-Harb*, a land of strife, and if they included India in the land of strife for their own reason, India has provided her reasons to be regarded as such". About Gandhi's practice of sexual restraints, his blunt comment is that it was profane and against the holiness of Hindu religion; "As regards chastity I should add that abstention from sexual intercourse in married life is a religious and moral offence in Hindu sacred law ... So these Gandhian Hindus are not as Hindu as they think they are". Tagore, according to him, is a *Bechara* or a helpless or pitiable writer. He attacks the interest of modern Hindus in Veda as artificially exaggerated since they learn about it from English translations. Modern Indians are sarcastically called *Anglicised Hindus of India*.

In his *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, Choudhuri writes that the peoples of India undertake many pervers and disgraceful activities for which they themselves are responsible. In other words, peoples of India are a bunch of idiots.

He is totally Hegelian in his grand philosophy. What's more — he seems to have high respect for Nietzschean *eugenics* too. Surprisingly, he has never mentioned Hegel or Nietzsche in any of his writings. He writes in his *Atmaghati Bangalee* (Suicidal Bangalee) about the Bangalee Marxists in most disrespectful manner, adding a direct criticism of Marx. "Marx stated that the character and life of the people are products of the environment. Such a damn lie has never been uttered by any great man before Marx. If the human species are controlled by the environment, then they would not have been humans, but animals" (my translation).

He is grateful to the British people for giving him opportunities and advantages of living in England. And he laments the lack of such gratefulness among the 'immigrants' living in Britain (obviously meaning all immigrants from the Indian sub-continent).



In some of his recent articles published in the *Ananda Bazaar* he often boasts he has not become an 'immigrant' despite living in England. What a statement! 'Immigrant' is a word to explain non-indigenous persons according to the nationality laws. It does not matter whether such a person is a labourer, or a 'highly intellectual person'.

These views constitute his 'central theme' and 'grand idea' about we, the Indians. It is no surprise that the CIA, the British and other powers welcome him.

Circe's Myth and Choudhuri's Self-Contradiction

The goddess Circe is known for her hospitality to anyone who comes to her gate. She feeds them and gives them comfortable beds to sleep on, but in the morning these people lose their memory. They become slaves of Circe. In N C Choudhuri's fertile imagination, India is a land where Circe plays her hypnotic power on all the foreigners as well as on her own people. Choudhuri finds himself lucky that Circe tried to cast her spell on him too while he was in his teens. But he managed to get out of her spell with the power of his youth. *He implies that is how he managed to become so successful.*

What Choudhuri never realises is that his belief in the myth of Circe makes him anti-Hegelian, for Circe is that environmental power which determines the life and character of the

people. According to Hegel, responsibilities for and determination of all our actions lie with ourselves, and not with the environment. So, if one believes in Circe's myth, one cannot surely be Hegelian. On the other hand, Marx in his theory of *cash nexus*, states that the economic determines the character and place of various institutions within the entire social formations. At the same time, the economic dominates the cultural, legal and ideological relations in society. Is not this Marxian doctrine the same philosophy reflected in the myth of Circe?

His Failure to write like Edward Said and also like Eric Williams

Western writers writing on the orient is called Orientalist. What would you call an oriental writer writing on the Orient? The answer is N C Choudhuri! He is the only orientalist hailing from the Orient with strongly biased view which is typically British imperial and colonial. Edward Said is also an Orientalist hailing from the orient, but his view is not of the imperial and colonial power holders. Said has put a completely different angle of vision. He talks of a *new knowledge* about the Orient or Africa. In his words,

"... the new knowledge would be the study of Orientalism or Africanism and, to take a related set, the study of Englishness and Frenchness."

He made no pretences in declaring

that the British culture, particularly in metropolitan England or Europe, social desirability connects that space

"by design, motive, and development to distant or peripheral worlds, conceived as desirable but subordinate."

Edward Said, then believes that the subordination of 'peripheral lands' was designed and motivated, but Nirad Choudhuri has a different explanation. In Choudhuri, the British originally regarded India

"as a land of fabulous wealth and splendour, and of barbaric pearl and gold."

In the moral and spiritual sphere, it was supposed to be the home of esoteric wisdom. But this idolatry broke down as soon as the Europeans came into

direct contact with the country and the people ... the Occidentals soon passed from sentimental admiration to disillusioned abuse."

In other words, to Choudhuri, Indian sub-continent was always a big zero. Whatever was thought of it were academic and mythical constructions. Such contempt for a land and its people is unheard of coming from a writer proves nothing but the fact that the writer is ignorant and colonial respectively in knowledge and attitude. Throughout the period from eighteenth century to present day, so-called western establishment scholars dismissed ideas of writing history that would be western, and not the non-existent history of ethnic entities and women. To them, India was always historically inferior to Europe and that fact alone served to justify British Indian imperialism.

Eric Williams, a black Trinidadian scholar submitted his doctoral thesis to a progressive publisher in England in late 1940s. The manuscript was sent back with a terse note "I would never publish such a book. It is contrary to British tradition." The book was published in the US in 1944 and reprinted in Britain in 1964 under the title *Capitalism and Slavery*. The book demonstrated convincingly that slavery was not introduced by the British solely for the purpose of abolishing it, as it was claimed by the British colonial power, and that it was abolished basically for economic reasons. Eric Williams continued his battle by demanding that the British establishment should reveal the true history of imperialism and colonialism. In his view, the history written by the British scholars was untrue, partial and heavily biased. William Stubbs who is the father of teaching 'history' in English universities was directly attacked by Eric Williams.

"Stubbs never said a word at any time about slavery, whether medieval or modern ... Certain it is that for a Pro-

fessor of Modern History at Oxford ... to make no mention at all of the West Indies, slavery, the abolition movement... is

an achievement of which few men must be capable."

A Critique of Nirad Choudhuri

Nirad Choudhuri, a great scholar and writer cannot even be a tiny shadow in the presence of Said or Williams. But he succeeded in clinching a space as a writer in Britain simply because he subscribed to the views that the British establishment dearly holds even now. Choudhuri reflects the same views once again taking full advantage of his own Indian origin. This was helped by his total lack of grasp of economic courses through which world's history has travelled.

Nirad Choudhuri fails to recognise, stated once above, that social institutions are but formations created by the economic force, and that the economic dominates the cultural, legal and ideological relations in society. Choudhuri should be told that this view is Marxian, and that Max Weber, guru of the anti-Marxist camp says the same.

Choudhuri constantly refers to *Babu Indians* or *Anglicised Indians*. He does not realise that such Babus are the result of the creations of a 'civil society' in India, for without a civil society, as Antonio Gramsci has clearly shown, the state, either colonial or indigenous, cannot rule. The British did not have to go far to make a 'civil society' in India. They simply used the existing Indian social framework and introduced a class-based education system out of which the 'new Indian Civil Society' emerged. Through them the British accomplished what they needed for colonial rule and gradual destruction of the economy of India. Choudhuri was born and educated at the height of the British colonial rule and naturally, he fell victim to the British education system in which all else are inferior save the British. The inferiority complex of many people of this sub-continent has been instilled by the British, and with apology, I wonder whether the diminutive height of Choudhuri reinforced that in him!

N C Choudhuri's boastful escape from Circe, and so from India is itself a myth. How could he be so sure that Circe from Hellenic Greece has not chosen live in England and decided to cast her spells on the foreigners like the Indian immigrants, one of whom is N C Choudhuri himself. He has utterly failed to elude Circe, and also failed to hide his true colour. But he has one consolation — he does not know it.

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impression

Views of The City at The Pompidou Centre

by Jean-Marc Depuich

Architects such as Antonio Sant 'Elia with his "Citta Nuova" (1913) or Chiattonne with his "Architecture for a Modern Metropolis" (1914) compose urban hymns to modernism, and design vertiginous towns, kinds of forbidden cities in which a complex network superimposes its paths of communication at the foot of Babylon in sky-scrapers. Such a vision was to be exacerbated in the cinema in Fritz Lang's "Metropolis."

LEAVING BEHIND THE MARKERS of time, just like in a town, the visitor is at leisure to stroll. By dint of lingering at will from unrealistic projects to plans, sketches and pictures, and from texts to photos, he easily distinguishes two opposite trends: the mineral city and the horticultural city.

The mineral city is born of the stone dream put into verse by Baudelaire. Any plants are banished from the concrete, metal, marble and water site. Futurists like that kind of metropolis, bustling, technological, caught up in speed and hurrying into the future. Architects such as Antonio Sant 'Elia with his "Citta Nuova" (1913) or Chiattonne with his "Architecture for a Modern Metropolis" (1914) compose urban hymns to modernism, and design vertiginous towns, kinds of forbidden cities in which a complex network superimposes its paths of communication at the foot of Babylonian sky-scrapers. Such a vision was to be exacerbated in

the cinema in Fritz Lang's "Metropolis." The horticultural town which culminates in English-style garden cities is far less disquieting. It looks after its flowerbeds. Thus Baron Haussmann leaves space, in the plans for his new Paris, for the gardens, parks and squares which a love of things English, that he shared with Napoleon III, made him appreciate. On the opposite side of the alleys in Bois de Boulogne wood, where fine society can admire itself in its elegance, and without which Proust's "time past" would not have had that scent of face-powder, suffusing the pleasure of the cattilays, the working classes are supposed to smell the memories of their rural roots in the regenerating oxygen of the chlorophyll.

The same concern with hygiene, from the beginning of the century, led architects such as Henard and Tony Garnier to break up the alignment of streets by creating gardens or parts of buildings which were set back from the road. From then on, (and this was a

radical break), the city was no longer looked upon as a tissue of circulation corridors or blocks of dwellings. The traditional city was dismantled in favour of open spaces in which discontinuous oblong bars of buildings, towerblocks and shopping centres emerged.

Backed by this new concept, Le Corbusier crushingly announces, "the corridor-street has to be killed". At that same time, deaf to the anathema, the Surrealists wandered through the streets and boulevards where the magic of the world flowed. Nadja and the peasant of Paris built the myths of the modern city and it was in the street that Breton and Aragon drew the founding myths, just as it was in the street that the photographers (Doisneau, Cartier-Bresson, and Brassai) seized the instants of living beauty.

The architects then became more humble. The time of triumphant certitudes was over. The outline of the old towns blossomed again in designers'

sketches. "We should not try to find a definition of the city too quickly", Georges Perec advised. "It is far too big and we have every chance of being mistaken."

The inhabitants should not be forgotten either. The working classes flocked to the towns and suburbs of the industrial revolution. Gustave Dore engraved their misery in London. James Ensor saw them, a river of haggard faces, pursued by death. George Grosz's *Metropolis* was a pandemonium red with fire, in which a people of hasty city-dwellers went into convulsions.

But cities are also joy, games, local dances, ferris, wheels and fairgrounds, noisy cafes with their dazzling lights, shows, songs, meetings, dreams and love. In the *Kiss*, a wood-cut by Frans Masereel, a man and a woman, each one at his own window, lean across and kiss and, beneath the arch of their bodies the street celebrations go on.



L'Actualité En France

Frans Masereel The Kiss woodcut, 1925