

**Shield of Memory as Defense Mechanism in Amit Chaudhuri's A
*Strange and Sublime Address***

¹**G. Karthigaijothi** M.A., M.Phil.,
Research Scholar and Author, Department of English, Mother Teresa Women's
University,

²**Dr. K. M. Sumathi** M.A., Ph.D.
Research Guide and Co-author, Principal (FAC), Government Arts and Science
College, Veda sandur

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Abstract

Memory plays a significant role as a defense mechanism. It serves as a shield against the onslaught of traumatic experiences, harsh or painful realities, and emotional or psychological discomforts. Individuals can temporarily escape from these tensions by selectively recalling, repressing and distorting. It unconsciously creates an alternative reality which functions to cope with an individual's unpleasant or harsh realities. Many writers have employed defense mechanism in their novels in order to present the harsh reality in their work. This paper attempts to explicate defence mechanism with reference to Amit Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address*.

Key Words: Repression, Distortion, Nostalgia, Memory, Defence Mechanism, Psychology

Introduction:

Amit Chaudhuri, a renowned diasporic writer has written nine novels. His first novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991) portrays a twelve-year-old Sandeep visiting Calcutta from Mumbai. He stays in his maternal uncle's house to spend the holidays. Here, Chaudhuri views himself through Sandeep by explaining Bengali culture, cuisine, and lifestyles. The novelist pictures his own experience as an outsider of Calcutta through Sandeep. The characters in this novel and their mental processes project that they are trying to defend their psyche through reaction formation, undoing, sublimation, dissociation, projection, rationalisation, displacement, intellectualisation, fantasy, humour, etc.

In psychoanalytic theory, a defence mechanism is any group of mental processes that enables the mind to reach a compromise that had no solution earlier.

The process is usually unconscious, and the compromise generally involves concealing from oneself internal drives or feelings that threaten to lower self-esteem or provoke anxiety. The concept derives from the psychoanalytic hypothesis that there are forces in the mind that oppose and battle against each other. The term was first used in Sigmund Freud's paper "The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence" (1894).

In Amit Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address*, psychological defense mechanisms can be seen as subtle influences in how the characters navigate their emotional landscapes and relationships. The protagonist, Sandeep, a young boy visiting his relatives in Calcutta, experiences a sense of nostalgia that subtly conveys repressed desires for connection and a simpler life. The detailed descriptions of mundane activities, such as eating, playing, or observing the streets of Calcutta, allow him to access a deeper emotional world that may not be consciously acknowledged. Sandeep, accustomed to the quieter, more structured life of Bombay, initially feels overwhelmed by Calcutta's chaotic, noisy, and unstructured life. "Calcutta is like a work of modern art that neither makes sense nor has utility, but exists for some esoteric reason"(Chaudhuri 13). Instead of expressing frustration or dislike, he develops a deep fascination for its simplicity and vibrancy. This could be seen as a form of reaction formation, where a conscious embrace of the opposite masks an unconscious discomfort, an admiration for the ordinary and mundane.

Chhotomama's jovial and indulgent nature masks deeper anxieties or dissatisfaction with his modest life. "'Let's go for a drive.' And Mamima, who had been sewing a button onto a trouser, bit the thread and asked: 'Where to?' 'Anywhere' said Chhotomama with child-like conviction." (Chaudhuri 17) His exaggerated cheerfulness could be a way to cope with or suppress these feelings. Sandeep aunt's diligence in domestic work and her stern demeanor reflect an unconscious frustration with the repetitive and constrained nature of her role. This is overcome by embracing it fully and performing her tasks with exaggerated precision. The children in the story, including Sandeep, often find joy and creativity in the ordinary. This could reflect reaction formation in their ability to transform boredom or dissatisfaction into imaginative play or exaggerated enjoyment of the mundane.

Sandeep's absorption in the rhythms of Calcutta acts as a way to repress feelings of alienation or distance from his more structured life in Bombay. "On Saturday, a cool breeze surprised them. It smelled of wet earth, sodden leaves." (Chaudhuri 83). The childlike focus on small joys and peculiarities like fans spinning, street vendors, and conversations among adults can be viewed as a form of displacement. Sandeep shifts his attention from any internal anxieties or family tensions to these outward, simpler details of everyday life.

In this novel, the concept of undoing as a defense mechanism can be interpreted in subtle ways. Undoing refers to an unconscious psychological process where a person attempts to 'cancel out' an uncomfortable thought, action, or feeling by engaging in a behavior or action that symbolically reverses or compensates for it. This mechanism is often subtle and is manifested through rituals, gestures, or exaggerated corrections. Jon Allen agrees that in remembering past events, our memory reconstructs memories in order to preserve our "self concept at the time" (1995, p. 102).reconstructs memories in orderto preserveour "self-concept at the time"reconstructs memories in orderto preserveour "self-concept at the time"The novel often frames Sandeep's visit to Calcutta as a return to childhood simplicity and emotional security. His immersion in the slower pace and domestic warmth of his uncle's house is seen as a regressive defense mechanism, allowing him to retreat from the pressures of his mundane life momentarily. Sandeep's perspective often idealizes the everyday world of Calcutta, transforming ordinary moments into something poetic and profound. This idealization could be a defense against feelings of dissatisfaction or loss, changing what otherwise seemed mundane into sources of beauty and comfort.

The portrayal of adults, particularly Sandeep's uncle and aunt, is often filtered through his childlike lens. Sandeep projects his own needs for care and understanding onto these figures, seeing them as embodiments of warmth and stability, even when their own lives may have complexities he cannot grasp. Chaudhuri's prose itself mirrors a process of sublimation, turning the ordinary into a literary exploration of beauty and meaning. This parallels the psychological mechanism where potentially negative or overwhelming emotions are transformed into something constructive, such as art or heightened appreciation for life

By blending detailed descriptions with a tone of meditative simplicity, *A Strange and Sublime Address* subtly portrays how defense mechanisms operate in the characters' minds, often through Sandeep's perspective. These mechanisms help them find solace, manage uncertainty, and appreciate the profound beauty in ordinary life. To delve further into how psychological defense mechanisms operate in Amit Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address* some more instances can be cited focusing on specific episodes, characters, and their emotional underpinnings.

This novel can also be read as a meditation on escapism, especially through Sandeep's immersion in the life of his relatives in Calcutta. Sandeep's embrace of the leisurely and sensorial joys of Calcutta watching the relishing food, or observing street scenes functions as a kind of denial of the more regimented, alienated life in Bombay. This sense of escapism shields him from confronting any deeper dissatisfaction or fears about the rigid expectations of urban modernity. The simplicity of Calcutta provides a mental sanctuary. The novelist has juxtaposed Sandeep's life in a closed apartment and the liberty he enjoys at his Chhotomama's

house in Calcutta. The following description gives a vivid picture of the mundane life in Bombay and the simple and liberal life in Calcutta.

Once or twice, Sandeep remembered Bombay and felt oddly unhappy without knowing why. Alone in the big apartment on the twenty-third floor, he was like Adam in charge of paradise, given dominion over the birds and fishes; he was too much in the foreground. He hated being in the foreground; he wanted a housefly's anonymity. At school, he was Adam expelled, at large among the alien and the unforgiving. But here, in Chhtomama's house, he pulsed into life and passed into extinction according to his choice; he had liberty. (Chaudhuri 35-36)

While Sandeep views the adults around him, especially his uncle and aunt with childlike reverence, their actions often reflect subtle defense mechanisms of their own. The adults in the novel often rationalize their experiences to cope with latent disappointments. The uncle's commentary on the world his musings on small irritations or his gentle mocking of societal trends serves to rationalize any discontent he might feel, turning potential frustrations into witticisms. His ability to find humor or philosophical detachment in mundane events is a defense mechanism that transforms potential negativity into a more palatable form. he would enter the bathroom to have his pre-luncheon bath, humming a small tune to himself. He would turn on the old, ineffectual shower and, suddenly elated, begin singing aloud to himself. He had a resonant tenor voice, a voice both strong and delicate. (Chaudhuri 61-62)

Furthermore, the uncle channels his energy into routines and humor. His jokes and good-natured demeanor act as a way to mask or manage underlying frustrations, anxieties, or even boredom inherent in middle-class life. The aunt's preoccupation with daily tasks like cooking or discussing household matters can also be seen as a deflection, ensuring that practical concerns overshadow emotional or existential uncertainties.

Sandeep is very much surprised to see the adult relationship, especially between Sandeep's uncle and aunt, one could see a quiet suppression of any overt conflict. Their interactions are marked by politeness and routine, subtly avoiding deeper disagreements or discord. For instance, disagreements about household matters are subdued, allowing harmony to persist, even if it requires pushing aside individual frustrations.

Chaudhuri's prose, often likened to lyrical poetry, mirrors the process of sublimation, where the character's emotional and psychological experiences are transformed into something profound. Sandeep's awe for the aesthetics of Calcutta its humid air, monsoon rains, or the light falling on walls suggests how a childlike wonder elevates the ordinary. This parallels how people use creative or aesthetic

outlets to channel unconscious drives, finding joy and meaning in what might otherwise seem trivial.

Repression is a defense mechanism through which the mind unconsciously pushes away unacceptable thoughts, distressing memories, and uncomfortable emotions, keeping them out of conscious awareness. According to Goleman (1998), projection operates through two stages: denial and displacement. Initially, an individual rejects the presence of a distressing emotion, suppressing it from conscious awareness.

Nostalgia, in the novel, functions as a bridge between emotional longing and psychological comfort. Sandeep's interactions with his cousins, like playing with toys or exploring the environment, exemplify regression a retreat into childhood as a way of temporarily avoiding the complexities of adult relationships or his more systematic life in Bombay. This mechanism creates an idealized, almost dreamlike picture of his time in Calcutta, blurring reality with emotional yearning.

The streets, vendors, and even the weather in Calcutta are anthropomorphized and infused with meaning through Sandeep's gaze. Sandeep projects his emotional states onto the world around him. For instance, the languid afternoons, the smells of the street, and the vibrant colors become symbolic of inner contentment or yearning for harmony. This projection allows him to process complex feelings indirectly, assigning emotional significance to otherwise neutral external phenomena.

Sandeep idealizes the house in Calcutta, his relatives, and even his cousins' mischievous antics throughout the novel. This idealization protects him from confronting any potential flaws or tensions within the family dynamic, preserving his visit as a golden moment in his mind. The act of remembering becomes selective, filtering out negativity to create a warm, cohesive narrative. The stark contrast between the structured life of Bombay and the unhurried existence in Calcutta reflects a psychological juxtaposition. Sandeep's perception of Calcutta as idyllic and Bombay as constraining may reflect a form of splitting a defense mechanism that divides the world into extremes. By idealizing Calcutta, he creates a mental refuge from dissatisfaction with Bombay.

When Sandeep felt his equilibrium disturbed, his thoughts would run something like this: 'I wish it were the first day of the holidays, and I had just entered my room, and I had just heard we were going to Calcutta.' His mind went back to that moment, which had never really existed in quite that way, and savoured it." (Chaudhuri 36)

The novelist in *A Strange and Sublime Address* has skillfully handled psychological defense mechanisms in the behaviors and interactions of the

characters with their environment. He captures how defense mechanisms like repression, sublimation, regression, and projection work beneath the surface of ordinary life, transforming everyday experiences into profound emotional truths. The novel's lyrical tone and attention to detail mirror the character's attempts to process their emotions, turning simple moments into a reservoir of meaning and comfort.

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