

**Defamiliarization and Its Cultural-Emotional Impact on Modern Readers  
in Amit Chaudhuri's Fiction**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the role of defamiliarization in Amit Chaudhuri's fiction and its cultural-emotional impact on modern readers. Drawing from Russian Formalist theory, particularly Viktor Shklovsky's concept of making the familiar strange, the study examines how Chaudhuri's use of defamiliarization reorients reader perception and deepens emotional engagement. His narratives, often centered around mundane and everyday experiences, such as meals, walks, or household conversations, resist conventional plot-driven storytelling and instead draw attention to the unnoticed textures of daily life. By rendering the ordinary in unfamiliar ways, Chaudhuri not only slows down the reader's gaze but also provokes reflection on personal and cultural identity. The paper argues that this technique allows readers—especially those immersed in fast-paced modern environments—to rediscover emotional depth and cultural resonance in seemingly trivial experiences. Chaudhuri's fiction, with its focus on middle-class Indian life, postcolonial consciousness, and domestic spaces, bridges the gap between cultural specificity and universal human experience. Through close textual analysis of select works, this study illustrates how estrangement operates as a subtle but powerful force that reshapes the reader's inner response while challenging habitual ways of seeing. Ultimately, the paper highlights defamiliarization as a key element in fostering introspection, emotional receptivity, and cultural awareness in contemporary literary engagement.

**Keywords:** Defamiliarization, Amit Chaudhuri, reader perception, cultural identity, emotional engagement.

**Introduction**

Amit Chaudhuri's fiction stands apart in the landscape of modern Indian English literature through its deliberate subversion of narrative conventions and its focus on the intricacies of everyday life. Eschewing sensationalism and dramatic plot twists, Chaudhuri crafts a literary

world where the mundane becomes meaningful, and the familiar is rendered unfamiliar through the technique of defamiliarization. Rooted in the theories of Russian Formalism, particularly Viktor Shklovsky's idea that art must make the familiar strange to enhance perception, defamiliarization in Chaudhuri's work functions as a vital narrative and philosophical tool. It invites readers to slow down, reconsider their habitual ways of seeing, and engage more deeply with the world around them. His prose—marked by linguistic clarity, observational precision, and cultural rootedness—compels modern readers to pause and reflect, often disrupting their expectations and reawakening emotional sensitivity toward otherwise overlooked experiences. This study examines the cultural and emotional implications of defamiliarization in Chaudhuri's fiction, particularly its impact on contemporary readers navigating a fast-paced, distraction-driven world. The cultural aspect of his writing draws from the Indian middle-class experience, incorporating elements of Bengali domestic life, urban landscapes, and postcolonial identity, all of which are presented through a lens of estrangement. This not only challenges dominant cultural narratives but also compels readers to re-evaluate their connections to heritage, memory, and place. Emotionally, the technique fosters a quiet engagement with inner life—evoking nostalgia, introspection, and a sense of loss or stillness that modern readers may find both unsettling and enriching. By analyzing key works of Chaudhuri, this paper explores how defamiliarization operates as a bridge between cultural specificity and universal emotional response. It also considers how readers, far from being alienated by estrangement, are drawn into a deeper relationship with both the text and their own lived realities, resulting in a reflective, emotionally resonant reading experience.

### **Defamiliarization and the Evolution of Cultural Perception**

Defamiliarization, as a literary and artistic strategy, plays a pivotal role in the evolution of cultural perception by disrupting habitual modes of thought and compelling individuals to engage with their environments, identities, and inherited beliefs in unfamiliar and critically reflective ways. As modern societies grow increasingly globalized, mediated, and routinized, the capacity to perceive culture freshly is often dulled by repetition, commercialism, and ideological saturation. Defamiliarization intervenes in this process by stripping the sheen of familiarity from cultural norms, artifacts, and narratives, thus inviting readers and audiences to reconsider what they often accept uncritically. Rooted in the Russian Formalist tradition and popularized by Viktor Shklovsky, defamiliarization initially referred to linguistic and aesthetic disruptions in literary texts, but its implications extend far beyond form, influencing how

cultures evolve by challenging the lenses through which people interpret the world. By compelling individuals to “see anew,” defamiliarization alters the frameworks through which cultural identity, tradition, and social values are understood and transmitted. In literature, particularly within postcolonial and Indian-English fiction, defamiliarization allows writers to interrogate colonial legacies, social hierarchies, religious customs, and national myths by re-presenting them in ways that disrupt complacent or romanticized interpretations. For instance, when a writer depicts a traditional ritual not through celebratory exoticism but through the eyes of a disenchanted or marginalized observer, the cultural act is transformed into a site of interrogation and emotional complexity, urging readers to question its assumptions and consequences. Similarly, everyday experiences—eating, walking, praying, speaking—when rendered through defamiliarized narrative lenses, become charged with new symbolic and philosophical weight, reflecting the layered tensions of modern identity. This not only refreshes aesthetic engagement but also catalyzes cultural transformation by introducing alternative modes of perception. As such, defamiliarization becomes a tool of resistance and renewal: it resists the flattening of culture into static tradition or commodified heritage and renews it by exposing contradictions, silences, and possibilities within existing systems. It allows for the coexistence of reverence and critique, continuity and rupture. On a psychological level, defamiliarization encourages emotional self-awareness and empathy, because it places the reader in a state of cognitive estrangement, wherein previously overlooked perspectives—especially those of the marginalized, the ‘other,’ or the subaltern—are foregrounded and explored. This shift not only destabilizes dominant narratives but also democratizes perception by creating space for polyphony and nuance. Through this lens, cultural practices are no longer monolithic or timeless but are seen as evolving, contingent, and subject to reinterpretation. This has profound implications in contemporary multicultural societies, where defamiliarized representation fosters intercultural dialogue and introspective questioning rather than rigid identity politics. In the realm of language, defamiliarization can disrupt the colonial hierarchy of English by hybridizing it with vernacular idioms, rhythms, and syntax, thereby altering the cultural perception of language itself—from a tool of colonial power to a medium of creative negotiation. This linguistic transformation not only reflects cultural hybridity but also influences how communities perceive themselves and others through language. Furthermore, as digital media, artificial intelligence, and global networks increasingly mediate cultural consumption, defamiliarization stands as an ethical counter-force that slows down the

encounter with culture, forcing engagement over passive absorption. Artists and writers can thus use defamiliarization to highlight the absurdities of media-driven consumerism, challenge algorithmic homogenization, and protect the imaginative capacity to see difference and complexity. Ultimately, defamiliarization serves as both a mirror and a chisel: it reflects the deeply ingrained patterns of cultural perception while simultaneously reshaping them, expanding the aesthetic and ethical scope of what is seen, felt, and thought. In doing so, it plays a crucial role in the evolution of cultural consciousness, ensuring that perception remains a living, questioning, and transformative act rather than a mechanical function. It reminds us that culture is not merely inherited but interpreted, and that through the estrangement of the ordinary, we not only perceive differently—we become different.

### **The Emotional Impact of Defamiliarization on the Reader**

Defamiliarization, by rendering the familiar strange, initiates a powerful emotional response in the reader that goes beyond intellectual engagement and penetrates deeply into the realms of perception, memory, and empathy. Originally conceptualized by Viktor Shklovsky, defamiliarization forces the reader to confront the ordinary with renewed awareness, stripping away routine interpretation and allowing for a raw, often startling emotional resonance. This process disrupts the automated reading experience, compelling the reader to slow down, re-examine, and emotionally reprocess elements of life that have become background noise in their consciousness. The emotional impact of this technique is multifaceted, ranging from discomfort and disorientation to profound introspection, nostalgia, or catharsis. In the context of literature—especially Indian-English fiction where cultural layering is deeply embedded—defamiliarization often manifests through the depiction of everyday life, rituals, relationships, or emotional experiences in unfamiliar or poetic ways. This stylistic choice results in a heightened emotional sensitivity, as readers are prompted to feel deeply about moments or realities they may otherwise take for granted. For example, a mundane domestic scene described with lyrical precision can evoke unexpected feelings of tenderness or melancholy, because defamiliarization restores emotional weight to the overlooked. The emotional power of defamiliarization also lies in its ability to evoke empathy by presenting known experiences from perspectives that are unfamiliar or marginalized. When a reader is confronted with a situation they know well—such as a parent-child relationship, a street corner, or a mealtime ritual—but shown through the eyes of someone with a different emotional or cultural context, the distance created fosters not alienation but a more intimate emotional connection. It allows

the reader to occupy another's sensibility, often unsettling preconceived notions and widening the range of emotional response. Additionally, defamiliarization taps into memory, stirring buried feelings and associations through vivid sensory imagery and non-linear narratives that mimic the workings of human consciousness. In works by writers like Amit Chaudhuri or Arundhati Roy, the use of defamiliarized language and structure evokes not just intellectual reflection but an emotional journey—one that mirrors the ebb and flow of real-life memory, where the past intrudes upon the present and feeling precedes understanding. The reader is not merely witnessing events unfold but is emotionally implicated in the act of seeing and re-seeing. This immersion deepens emotional impact, making the reading experience not passive consumption but an affective reawakening. Defamiliarization also fosters emotional ambivalence—blurring the boundaries between beauty and pain, joy and sorrow, comfort and unease. This emotional complexity resists simplistic categorization and forces the reader to sit with contradictions, much like real life does. In doing so, literature becomes a space for emotional truthfulness, where readers are encouraged to feel in nuanced, layered, and often unresolved ways. Moreover, defamiliarization can intensify emotional impact through its disruption of narrative conventions. When readers encounter a story that defies linearity, predictable character arcs, or resolved endings, they are emotionally unsettled—prompted to confront ambiguity, fragmentation, or the absence of closure. This emotional disturbance mirrors the reader's own experiences of confusion, longing, or incompleteness, making the literary experience emotionally honest and psychologically resonant. In a broader sense, defamiliarization opens up emotional pathways that are often blocked by cultural conditioning or social expectation. By estranging familiar emotions—such as love, grief, or loneliness—it exposes their depth, contradictions, and moral ambiguity, offering the reader not just a clearer understanding of others but a deeper recognition of their own emotional lives. Ultimately, the emotional impact of defamiliarization lies in its capacity to break through desensitization, to pierce the habitual, and to reignite the reader's capacity to feel in fresh and meaningful ways. It transforms reading from a cognitive task into an emotional experience—one that lingers beyond the page, reshaping how the reader perceives not just literature, but their own life and the lives of others. In making the world unfamiliar, defamiliarization brings the reader closer to emotional truths, enriching their engagement with both art and reality.

### **The Role of Displacement in Defamiliarized Narratives**

Displacement plays a pivotal role in defamiliarized narratives, functioning as both a thematic and structural device that unmoors characters, settings, and readers from conventional frameworks of identity, belonging, and perception. In literature, displacement refers not only to the physical act of migration or exile but also to emotional, cultural, psychological, and linguistic estrangement from what is known or stable. When employed within defamiliarized narratives, displacement enhances the sense of disorientation and unfamiliarity, pushing readers to re-evaluate what they often accept as fixed or coherent. Through displacement, writers destabilize the reader's expectations of place, time, character, and causality, creating a space in which the unfamiliar can speak louder than the familiar. This estrangement intensifies reader engagement by evoking empathy, critical reflection, and heightened awareness of the self and the world. In postcolonial and diasporic literature, particularly within Indian-English fiction, displacement becomes both a narrative engine and an emotional core. Characters often inhabit liminal spaces—caught between countries, cultures, or personal histories—where their experiences cannot be neatly categorized or resolved. Writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, and Amit Chaudhuri explore this condition not as a dramatic rupture alone but as a quiet, enduring dissonance that permeates everyday life. Their narratives employ defamiliarization to depict displacement not as a distant crisis but as an intimate, textured experience. For instance, in Lahiri's fiction, characters experience cultural displacement through subtle moments: miscommunication in domestic settings, confusion over food habits, or the inability to name a feeling in a foreign tongue. These mundane experiences are rendered with lyrical precision that defamiliarizes the immigrant experience, compelling readers to see its emotional depth beyond cliché. Similarly, Rushdie's characters in *Midnight's Children* or *The Satanic Verses* are metaphorically and literally dislocated—fragmented across languages, histories, and identities—and this fragmentation is mirrored in the narrative structure itself, which defies linearity and realism. The narrative voice becomes unstable, shifting perspectives and timelines, thereby evoking the reader's own sense of narrative displacement. In such works, displacement is not resolved but embraced as a condition of modern existence. Defamiliarization through displacement thus becomes a method of truth-telling, exposing the contradictions and silences within dominant historical and cultural narratives. Moreover, linguistic displacement is central to defamiliarized narratives, particularly in postcolonial contexts where English is both a colonial legacy and a creative medium. Indian-English writers often displace the English language itself, infusing it with vernacular idioms, rhythms, and



syntactic deviations that reflect the hybrid nature of their cultural experience. This linguistic defamiliarization challenges readers—especially Western ones—to engage with English on new terms, as a language of resistance and reinvention rather than mere inheritance. By making English unfamiliar, these writers assert the complexity of their linguistic identity and critique the cultural hierarchies embedded in global literary discourse. Thematically, displacement allows for the exploration of alienation, nostalgia, identity, and the search for home—not just geographically, but spiritually and emotionally. Characters often grapple with questions of who they are when removed from familiar surroundings or placed within contexts that do not affirm their sense of self. In Amit Chaudhuri's novels, for example, displacement is not always dramatic or external but internal and emotional. His characters often inhabit cities or homes that feel slightly off-center, as if dislocated from time itself. Through subtle, meditative descriptions of space, memory, and routine, Chaudhuri defamiliarizes even the act of returning home, portraying it as an encounter with the unfamiliar self. This quiet displacement invites readers to reflect on their own assumptions about belonging, memory, and the continuity of selfhood. Furthermore, displacement in defamiliarized narratives often brings to light issues of class, caste, gender, and other social hierarchies by showing how certain bodies are forcibly displaced—economically, politically, or socially—and how their narratives are obscured or silenced. By presenting these realities in ways that estrange rather than reinforce stereotypes, authors allow readers to perceive the systemic forces at play in shaping individual lives. Emotional displacement, too, is rendered through fragmented narration, nonlinear timelines, and dissonant tonal shifts that mirror the inner chaos of characters dealing with grief, trauma, or identity crises. In all these instances, displacement is not simply a backdrop but a generative force that drives narrative innovation and emotional resonance. Ultimately, the role of displacement in defamiliarized narratives is to unsettle—not just the characters within the story but also the reader's understanding of narrative norms, cultural assumptions, and emotional truths. It transforms the experience of reading into one of discovery, where meaning is not given but slowly constructed through the act of navigating estrangement. Displacement thus emerges as both a theme and technique, intricately woven into the fabric of defamiliarized storytelling, allowing literature to mirror the fragmented, fluid, and often dislocated reality of contemporary life. Through this lens, displacement is not merely loss or absence but a space of potential—a terrain where new perceptions, identities, and forms of empathy can be cultivated.

### **Cultural Hybridity and Defamiliarization**

Cultural hybridity and defamiliarization are deeply interconnected literary and theoretical concepts that intersect to challenge dominant narratives, question rigid identity formations, and create spaces for alternative modes of perception and storytelling, particularly in the context of postcolonial and transnational literature. Cultural hybridity, a term widely explored by theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha, refers to the blending, overlapping, and negotiation of cultural elements that emerge when two or more cultural systems interact—often in the aftermath of colonialism, migration, or globalization. Defamiliarization, coined by Viktor Shklovsky, is the artistic strategy of making the familiar strange to reawaken perception. When these two forces converge in literature, especially in Indian-English fiction, they produce narratives that are neither rooted solely in traditional cultural representations nor entirely absorbed by Western literary norms. Instead, they operate in a liminal space—hybrid in form, language, and sensibility—using defamiliarization as a means of unsettling fixed cultural perceptions and inviting the reader to engage with identity, tradition, and history in newly mediated ways. Writers such as Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Amit Chaudhuri, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Kiran Desai embody this interplay, crafting stories where hybrid cultural identities are not only thematic concerns but formal engines of narrative experimentation. In *Midnight's Children*, for instance, Rushdie fuses Western magical realism with Indian oral storytelling, Persian miniature-like detail with Biblical allusion, and English syntax with Hindustani cadences, producing a linguistic and structural hybridity that defamiliarizes both the colonial English canon and indigenous narrative conventions. This literary hybridity reflects the cultural hybridity of Rushdie's characters, who are born into a postcolonial India still negotiating its fractured self-image. The defamiliarization here is not limited to form; it affects how readers perceive nationalism, religion, and history—transforming them from stable categories into fluid, contested terrains. Similarly, Jhumpa Lahiri's diasporic fiction presents culturally hybrid subjects who exist in the "third space" between inherited Indian traditions and adopted Western norms. Her restrained, realist prose often defamiliarizes the seemingly simple experiences of migration, domestic life, or intergenerational conflict by rendering them with emotional precision and cultural nuance that reveal hybrid identity as a site of quiet turmoil and existential ambiguity. The very act of using the English language to describe Bengali rituals or emotional responses that resist Western articulation contributes to a form of linguistic defamiliarization that mirrors cultural hybridity itself. Amit Chaudhuri, on the other hand, disrupts the reader's expectations of hybridity as dramatic cultural conflict by offering instead a more subdued and



lyrical form of cultural blending. In his novels, the hybrid identity is experienced not as trauma but as texture—a composite of aesthetic, musical, philosophical, and linguistic elements that shape everyday perception. He defamiliarizes both the content and form of Indian-English fiction by slowing narrative time, employing minimalist prose, and focusing on introspective male protagonists whose cultural hybridity is expressed through a fusion of Tagorean quietude and Proustian reflection. Through this, Chaudhuri shows that hybridity can be a meditative space, not just a postcolonial battleground. Cultural hybridity in defamiliarized literature also impacts the representation of place and temporality. Cities like Calcutta, Delhi, London, or New York are not presented in familiar, tourist-oriented ways but as layered, hybrid spaces where cultures intersect, memory persists, and belonging is questioned. Temporal structures become fragmented, echoing the ruptures of colonial histories and diasporic dislocations, and defamiliarize linear storytelling by embedding cyclical, associative, or mythic temporalities. Furthermore, hybridity enables the blending of genres—myth with realism, poetry with prose, memoir with fiction—disrupting Western genre expectations and contributing to formal defamiliarization. This narrative hybridity reflects a deeper cultural truth: that hybrid identities resist coherence and demand pluralistic, open-ended forms of narration. Language, too, becomes a site of defamiliarization through hybridity. Indian-English fiction frequently incorporates untranslated words, code-switching, regional idioms, and syntactic innovations that disrupt the smooth flow of English and assert the presence of other epistemologies within it. By dislocating the reader from standard English, this linguistic hybridity mirrors the cultural estrangement of postcolonial and diasporic subjects, compelling readers to participate in the interpretive labor that cultural negotiation demands. This process is not merely aesthetic but ideological, as it undermines the authority of linguistic and cultural purism. Ultimately, the intersection of cultural hybridity and defamiliarization in literature reveals identity as an evolving performance rather than a fixed essence. It affirms that meaning is not pre-given but constructed in the space between cultures, languages, histories, and sensibilities. In defamiliarizing cultural norms, hybrid narratives do not resolve tensions—they expose and dwell within them, offering a richer, more complex vision of the self and society. For modern readers, this fusion deepens engagement with texts and prompts a reevaluation of their own cultural assumptions, rendering hybridity not as a crisis but as a dynamic mode of being that reflects the multifaceted reality of contemporary life.

### **Conclusion**

Amit Chaudhuri's strategic use of defamiliarization in his fiction serves as a powerful literary device that extends beyond aesthetics, influencing both the cultural understanding and emotional resonance experienced by modern readers. By presenting everyday moments—such as domestic routines, city strolls, or family conversations—through a lens that estranges the familiar, Chaudhuri reawakens the reader's perception, compelling them to see the ordinary with fresh eyes. This technique fosters a form of cultural introspection, particularly among readers rooted in or curious about Indian contexts, as it reframes middle-class life, postcolonial identities, and traditional values in a manner that is both accessible and thought-provoking. Simultaneously, the emotional impact of his work is subtly profound; readers are drawn into states of quiet contemplation, nostalgia, and emotional sensitivity. Rather than alienating, Chaudhuri's brand of defamiliarization deepens engagement by creating space for reflection in a fast-moving, overstimulated world. His fiction allows modern readers—often distanced from their immediate environments by digital distraction and narrative excess—to reconnect with moments of stillness and introspection. The emotional landscape he constructs is one of calm yet complex interiority, where feelings emerge not from dramatic incidents but from the texture of ordinary life. Through this study, it becomes evident that Chaudhuri's defamiliarization is not merely a formal choice but a deeply humanistic one—offering a quiet resistance to narrative speed and cultural erasure, and instead affirming the beauty and emotional richness of the everyday. In doing so, his work resonates powerfully with modern readers, encouraging renewed ways of seeing, feeling, and understanding the cultural fabric of their lives.

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