Cultural Identity and Intellectual Exile: Nirad C. Chaudhuri and the Crisis of Colonial Modernity*

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Abstract

The writings of Nirad C. Chaudhuri occupy a singular and deeply contentious position within twentieth-century Indian Anglophone literature. Celebrated by some as a cosmopolitan intellectual of exceptional erudition and condemned by others as an apologist for empire, Chaudhuri persistently resisted the ideological certainties of postcolonial nationalism. This paper examines the complex relationship between cultural identity, geographical location, and intellectual alienation in Chaudhuri's major works, particularly The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*,* Thy Hand, Great Anarch!*,* A Passage to England*, and* Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse*. Drawing upon postcolonial theory, especially the works of Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said, and Frantz Fanon, the paper argues that Chaudhuri constructs identity not through territorial belonging but through intellectual and civilizational affiliation. His lifelong engagement with European classicism and Enlightenment rationalism generates a profound estrangement from the political and cultural realities of post-independence India, while his eventual migration to England exposes the instability of identities founded upon idealized cultural imagination. Rather than reading Chaudhuri merely as a colonial mimic or eccentric Anglophile, this study interprets him as a liminal intellectual shaped by the psychological fractures of colonial modernity. By tracing the evolution of his cultural consciousness across different historical and geographical spaces, the paper demonstrates how Chaudhuri's work becomes an enduring meditation on exile, belonging, and the tragic disjunction between intellectual aspiration and historical reality.*

Keywords: Nirad C. Chaudhuri, cultural identity, colonial modernity, intellectual exile, postcolonial alienation, Anglophilia, Bengali Renaissance

Introduction

Questions of identity, belonging, and cultural affiliation occupy a central position in postcolonial literary discourse, particularly in societies shaped by the historical experience of imperialism. Colonialism transformed not only political institutions and economic systems but also modes of perception, structures of knowledge, and cultural self-understanding. The encounter with Western education frequently produced a divided consciousness in which indigenous traditions coexisted uneasily with European intellectual frameworks. For many colonial intellectuals, this tension generated a profound crisis of selfhood, marked by uncertainty regarding cultural inheritance, national belonging, and historical identity. Such anxieties became especially visible in twentieth-century Indian English literature, where writers repeatedly

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negotiated the complex relationship between colonial modernity and indigenous cultural memory.

Within this intellectual and literary context, Nirad C. Chaudhuri remains one of the most controversial figures in Indian Anglophone writing. Unlike many of his contemporaries who aligned themselves with anti-colonial nationalism or cultural revivalism, Chaudhuri openly admired the intellectual and institutional legacy of the British Empire. His works repeatedly challenge dominant nationalist narratives and question the ideological assumptions underlying post-independence Indian identity. Such positions led nationalist critics to condemn him as an apologist for imperialism and a representative of colonial mimicry. However, reducing Chaudhuri merely to an Anglophile defender of empire oversimplifies the complexity of his intellectual position and ignores the deeper psychological tensions shaping his work.

Recent developments in postcolonial theory allow a more nuanced understanding of Chaudhuri's cultural consciousness. Homi K. Bhabha argues that colonial discourse produces hybrid and internally divided identities characterized by ambivalence, mimicry, and cultural displacement (Bhabha 122). Similarly, Edward Said demonstrates how imperial systems of knowledge reshape the imagination of colonized subjects by encouraging identification with metropolitan cultural values while simultaneously denying complete belonging within imperial structures (Said 25). Frantz Fanon further examines the fractured psychology of the colonial intellectual, whose consciousness is often divided between inherited traditions and acquired European modes of thought (Fanon 18). Chaudhuri's writings emerge from precisely such contradictions. His intellectual formation within the milieu of the Bengali Renaissance exposed him simultaneously to Indian classical traditions and European humanism, producing a consciousness deeply attached to Western literary and historical culture yet increasingly estranged from the political and social realities of modern India.

Although critics have frequently examined Chaudhuri's Anglophilia and anti-nationalist opinions, relatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to the relationship between geography, cultural imagination, and intellectual exile across the full range of his writings. Existing interpretations often approach him either as a colonial loyalist or as a conservative cultural critic. Such readings fail to recognize the tragic dimension of his intellectual journey and the instability underlying his search for civilizational belonging. This paper seeks to address that critical gap by examining how Chaudhuri constructs identity through cultural and intellectual affiliation rather than through geographical rootedness or national sentiment. His writings repeatedly reveal a tension between physical location and imaginative belonging, ultimately producing a condition of double alienation. His estrangement from postcolonial India is gradually mirrored by an equally profound disillusionment with the modern West, particularly the post-war England that no longer corresponded to the classical civilization he had idealized through literature and historical memory.

Using close textual analysis alongside postcolonial and cultural-historical approaches, this paper studies four major works by Chaudhuri: *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951), *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* (1987), *A Passage to England* (1959), and *Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse* (1997). These texts collectively trace the evolution of a consciousness suspended between admiration and estrangement, memory and displacement, historical reality and cultural imagination. The study argues that Chaudhuri's literary and intellectual identity is fundamentally shaped by a persistent conflict between geographical reality and civilizational aspiration. His lifelong attempt to locate himself within an imagined European cultural tradition ultimately leaves him alienated from both the India he rejected and the modern West he revered.

Far from being a marginal eccentricity within Indian literary history, Chaudhuri represents a deeply significant figure through whom the psychological consequences of colonial modernity become sharply visible. His writings illuminate the emotional costs of constructing identity through borrowed cultural genealogies while remaining historically and geographically displaced from them. In this sense, Chaudhuri emerges not simply as an Anglophile critic of Indian nationalism, but as a profoundly tragic intellectual whose life and works embody the unresolved contradictions of the colonial encounter itself.

Chaudhuri and the Crisis of Colonial Consciousness:

The intellectual formation of Nirad C. Chaudhuri cannot be understood outside the historical and cultural atmosphere of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bengali Renaissance. Emerging within the conditions of colonial rule, the Bengali intelligentsia occupied a paradoxical position: politically subordinated to imperial authority yet intellectually shaped by unprecedented access to European education, literature, philosophy, and liberal humanist thought. Colonial modernity thus created a generation of Indian intellectuals whose consciousness developed through the simultaneous interaction of indigenous traditions and Western intellectual frameworks. Chaudhuri belonged profoundly to this transitional world, and his writings repeatedly reveal the psychological consequences of inhabiting multiple civilizational inheritances without feeling fully secure within either.

Born in Kishorganj in East Bengal in 1897, Chaudhuri grew up in a family environment where intellectual cultivation occupied a central place in domestic life. His autobiographical reflections describe a childhood immersed in English literature, European history, classical music, and Enlightenment rationalism alongside Bengali cultural traditions and Sanskrit learning. This dual inheritance became the defining condition of his intellectual identity. Unlike nationalist thinkers who viewed colonial education primarily as an instrument of cultural domination, Chaudhuri regarded European intellectual culture as a source of liberation and expansion. In *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, he recalls that Western education appeared to his generation not as "an alien intrusion" but as "an enlargement of the world" (Chaudhuri 87). Such statements reveal the depth of his emotional and intellectual investment in European civilization from an early age.

This attachment to Europe, however, gradually developed into a more complex and troubling form of cultural estrangement. As Chaudhuri became increasingly absorbed in European literature, classical history, and Enlightenment thought, he also grew progressively distant from the dominant ideological currents of Indian nationalism. His intellectual orientation emphasized rational inquiry, historical consciousness, and individual critical judgment, values he believed were declining within the emotionally charged atmosphere of anti-colonial politics. Consequently, Chaudhuri often perceived modern Indian political culture as anti-intellectual, sentimental, and historically unreflective. His criticism of nationalist movements emerged not merely from political disagreement but from a broader anxiety regarding the erosion of what he considered civilized intellectual culture.

The influence of the Bengali Renaissance remained central to this worldview. Chaudhuri deeply admired figures such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Michael Madhusudan Dutt, whom he regarded as representatives of a cosmopolitan intellectual tradition capable of synthesizing Indian cultural inheritance with European rationalism. In his view, nineteenth-century Bengal had produced a uniquely liberal and intellectually open environment that encouraged historical inquiry and critical engagement with Western thought. However, he believed that this tradition gradually declined during the rise of mass nationalism in the early twentieth century. The

movement from elite constitutional politics toward populist mobilization appeared to him as a movement away from intellectual discipline and toward emotional collectivism. This perception shaped Chaudhuri's increasingly hostile attitude toward major nationalist leaders, particularly Mahatma Gandhi. Although he acknowledged Gandhi's political influence and moral authority, he remained deeply skeptical of Gandhian politics, which he associated with anti-modernism, spiritual populism, and emotional mass mobilization. In *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!*, Chaudhuri criticizes the transformation of Indian nationalism into what he viewed as a politics driven more by sentiment than by rational institutional development (Chaudhuri 412). Such observations reveal his belief that political modernity required intellectual rigor and historical realism rather than symbolic moral performance.

At the same time, Chaudhuri's writings complicate simplistic interpretations of colonial mimicry. Postcolonial theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha describe colonial mimicry as a condition in which the colonized subject becomes "almost the same, but not quite," inhabiting a space of incomplete cultural imitation and ambivalent identity (Bhabha 122). Chaudhuri certainly internalized many elements of European intellectual culture, yet his engagement with the West cannot be reduced to superficial imitation or psychological dependency. His attachment to European civilization was rigorous, scholarly, and critically self-aware. He did not merely reproduce colonial ideology; rather, he actively employed European historical and philosophical frameworks to critique both Indian society and modern Western civilization itself. Nevertheless, the emotional cost of this intellectual positioning becomes increasingly visible throughout his writings. Chaudhuri's admiration for Europe gradually isolates him from the collective political culture surrounding him, producing a recurring sense of internal exile. Even while living in India, he frequently presents himself as psychologically detached from his social environment. In *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, he recalls experiencing "a feeling of antagonism to the social and intellectual life around" him that culminated in "absolute isolation" (312). Alienation, therefore, becomes not simply a recurring theme in his writings but a defining structure of consciousness.

This condition reflects the broader crisis of colonial modernity analyzed by Frantz Fanon, who argues that colonial education often produces intellectuals suspended between indigenous culture and metropolitan values (Fanon 176). Yet Chaudhuri differs from many postcolonial intellectuals because he openly embraced this estrangement instead of attempting to resolve it through nationalism or cultural recovery. He transformed alienation into a form of intellectual identity, presenting himself as an independent observer standing outside ideological conformity. In doing so, he cultivated a self-image grounded in detachment, skepticism, and civilizational critique.

However, Chaudhuri's cultural orientation also contained an inherent contradiction. The Europe he admired existed primarily as a textual and historical construct preserved through literature, philosophy, and memory rather than as a contemporary social reality. His devotion was directed toward an idealized vision of European civilization associated with classical education, liberal humanism, imperial confidence, and aesthetic refinement. Consequently, his intellectual identity depended upon a civilization already beginning to transform under the pressures of modernity, democratization, and post-war cultural change. This tension would later become central to his writings after his migration to England, where the imagined Europe of his literary consciousness increasingly collided with the realities of contemporary Western society. Thus, the crisis of colonial consciousness in Chaudhuri's work emerges from the unstable relationship between geographical location and intellectual belonging. He remained physically rooted in India while imaginatively locating himself within a European civilizational tradition. Yet this imaginative relocation never produced complete belonging; instead, it intensified his sense of

displacement from both worlds. His writings therefore illuminate the profound psychological tensions created by colonial education and cultural aspiration. Rather than resolving the conflict between East and West, Chaudhuri's work exposes the enduring instability of identities formed at the intersection of empire, history, and cultural desire.

Geography, Memory, and Cultural Estrangement in *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian:*

Published in 1951, only a few years after Indian independence, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* occupies a distinctive position within Indian autobiographical and postcolonial writing. Unlike nationalist autobiographies that align personal experience with the collective struggle for political liberation, Nirad C. Chaudhuri constructs his narrative through distance, irony, and intellectual self-examination. The work resists the celebratory rhetoric surrounding independence and instead presents the colonial intellectual as a figure marked by estrangement, divided loyalties, and historical uncertainty. More than a personal memoir, the autobiography becomes an extended reflection on the unstable relationship between geography, cultural imagination, and civilizational identity. From its opening chapters, the text establishes a tension between physical environment and imaginative consciousness. Chaudhuri offers remarkably detailed descriptions of Kishorganj, Banagram, and Calcutta, yet these places are rarely experienced in purely local terms. The landscapes of Bengal are consistently interpreted through European literary and aesthetic frameworks. Rivers, monsoons, villages, and seasonal rhythms are frequently associated with English poetry, classical history, and Western artistic sensibility. This mode of description reveals how deeply European intellectual culture had shaped Chaudhuri's perception of reality itself. Geography remains physically Indian, but imaginatively it is translated into a European symbolic and literary vocabulary.

This transformation reflects the broader cultural effects of colonial education. As Edward Said argues, imperial systems of knowledge influence not only political understanding but also the imaginative structures through which colonized subjects perceive the world (Said 25). Chaudhuri's autobiographical consciousness demonstrates precisely such internalization. European literature and historical thought become emotionally and intellectually central to his identity, often appearing more immediate to him than the social realities of contemporary India. Consequently, the autobiography repeatedly presents identity not as a product of birthplace or nationality but as an outcome of cultivated intellectual affiliation.

The famous dedication to the British Empire at the beginning of the text remains one of the most controversial passages in Indian literary history: "To the memory of the British Empire in India / Which conferred subjecthood on us / But withheld citizenship; / To which yet / Every one of us threw out the challenge: 'Civis Britannicus Sum'" (Chaudhuri vii).

Nationalist critics frequently interpreted this dedication as evidence of colonial loyalty or ideological servility. However, the passage functions less as a political defense of imperial rule than as a declaration of cultural and intellectual indebtedness. For Chaudhuri, the British Empire represented access to liberal education, historical consciousness, and cosmopolitan intellectual culture. The contradiction embedded within the dedication is deeply significant: the same empire that denied political equality also shaped the intellectual framework through which he understood civilization, history, and selfhood. This paradox lies at the center of Chaudhuri's cultural identity throughout the autobiography. Memory in the text further deepens this sense of contradiction. Chaudhuri's recollections are not nostalgic attempts to recover a lost homeland; rather, memory becomes a critical instrument through which he evaluates the transformations of Indian society and culture. His descriptions of Bengal are rich in sensory detail, yet they are often

accompanied by reflections on provincialism, social inertia, and historical stagnation. Even while expressing emotional attachment to the landscapes of his childhood, Chaudhuri resists romanticizing nativeness or indigenous belonging. His prose moves continuously between intimacy and detachment, admiration and critique. This tonal complexity prevents the autobiography from becoming either a nationalist celebration of homeland or a simplistic endorsement of colonial modernity.

The influence of the Bengali Renaissance is equally central to Chaudhuri's intellectual formation. He regarded nineteenth-century Bengal as a uniquely cosmopolitan intellectual environment where Indian traditions encountered European rationalism in productive ways. Figures such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Michael Madhusudan Dutt represented, for Chaudhuri, a liberal cultural tradition grounded in historical awareness, intellectual openness, and critical engagement with the West. He believed that this cosmopolitan spirit gradually declined with the rise of emotionally charged nationalism in the twentieth century. In his view, the rational and intellectually disciplined ethos of the Bengali Renaissance was replaced by political sentimentality and collective ideological conformity. This perception intensifies Chaudhuri's alienation from modern Indian political culture. As the autobiography progresses, he increasingly portrays himself as emotionally and intellectually detached from the ideological environment around him. His years in Calcutta become particularly important in this regard. Once celebrated as the intellectual center of modern Indian thought, the city gradually appears in his narrative as a space of cultural exhaustion and ideological decline. He recalls experiencing "a feeling of antagonism to the social and intellectual life around" him, which eventually culminated in "absolute isolation" (Chaudhuri 312). Alienation here is represented not simply as personal loneliness but as a deeper crisis of civilizational belonging.

Chaudhuri's criticism of Indian nationalism emerges directly from this crisis. He believed that the nationalist movement increasingly privileged emotional mobilization over rational inquiry and historical realism. In his interpretation, anti-colonial politics encouraged collective sentiment while discouraging intellectual independence. Such arguments made him deeply unpopular in post-independence India, where nationalism frequently functioned as both political ideology and moral legitimacy. Yet his critique also reveals the extent to which his own identity had become inseparable from European intellectual traditions and Enlightenment values. At the same time, the autobiography complicates any simplistic interpretation of Chaudhuri as merely "Westernized." His admiration for Europe was not rooted in racial aspiration or social opportunism but in a genuine search for intellectual order and cultural continuity. The tragedy of the text lies precisely in the impossibility of fully realizing this aspiration. Although Chaudhuri identifies emotionally with European civilization, he remains geographically and historically situated within colonial India. He inhabits a liminal position in which neither complete assimilation nor authentic rootedness becomes possible.

This sense of in-betweenness closely resembles Homi K. Bhabha's understanding of colonial subjectivity as a condition of ambivalence and hybridity (Bhabha 122). Yet Chaudhuri differs from many postcolonial writers because he does not attempt to reconcile these divided inheritances through cultural synthesis. Instead, he openly embraces contradiction and transforms alienation into a mode of intellectual independence. His autobiography therefore becomes not a narrative of national integration but a record of growing separation from the dominant ideological currents of his time.

Ultimately, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* reveals the psychological complexity of colonial modernity through the figure of an intellectual unable to locate himself securely within either indigenous nationalism or imperial culture. The text transforms personal memory into a

broader meditation on exile, historical transition, and the fragile relationship between geography and imagination. By presenting identity as unstable, contested, and historically fragmented, Chaudhuri anticipates many of the central concerns of later postcolonial theory while simultaneously resisting its ideological certainties.

Political Disillusionment and Historical Fragmentation in *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!:*

If *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* traces the intellectual formation of Nirad C. Chaudhuri within colonial Bengal, *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* records the collapse of the political and cultural order that had shaped his consciousness. Published in 1987 as a monumental sequel to his autobiography, the work examines the turbulent decades between 1921 and 1952, encompassing the rise of mass nationalism, the intensification of communal conflict, the trauma of Partition, and the uncertain beginnings of independent India. More than a historical memoir, the text presents Chaudhuri's deeply pessimistic interpretation of modern Indian history and reveals the full extent of his estrangement from postcolonial nationalism. Throughout the narrative, political change appears not as liberation but as fragmentation—a movement away from intellectual discipline and civic order toward ideological disorder and historical instability. The title itself, drawn from Alexander Pope's *The Dunciad*, immediately establishes the tone of the work. The phrase "Great Anarch" evokes images of chaos, decay, and civilizational collapse, suggesting that the end of British rule represented, for Chaudhuri, not the triumph of freedom but the disintegration of an already fragile social order. This perspective sharply distinguishes him from dominant nationalist historiography, which typically celebrates the freedom struggle as a heroic movement toward collective self-realization. Chaudhuri instead approaches the same historical events with irony, skepticism, and profound apprehension. His narrative repeatedly questions whether political independence necessarily produces intellectual maturity or cultural stability.

Central to this pessimism is his critique of mass nationalism. Chaudhuri believed that Indian political culture underwent a decisive transformation under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Earlier nationalist politics, associated with constitutional reform, liberal debate, and elite intellectual culture, gradually gave way to emotionally charged mass mobilization. Chaudhuri viewed this transition with deep suspicion. In his interpretation, Gandhian politics privileged symbolism, spiritual rhetoric, and emotional appeal at the expense of rational institutional development. Reflecting upon the political climate of the 1920s and 1930s, he argues that nationalism increasingly became "a movement of emotional excitement rather than disciplined political thought" (Chaudhuri 428). Such observations reveal his broader fear that modern Indian politics had abandoned the rational and cosmopolitan ideals associated with the nineteenth-century Bengali intelligentsia. His criticism of Gandhi therefore extends beyond personal disagreement into a wider civilizational anxiety. Chaudhuri regarded Gandhian politics as anti-modern in its suspicion of industrialism, scientific rationality, and liberal individualism. While many nationalist writers celebrated Gandhi as the moral conscience of India, Chaudhuri perceived in him a dangerous fusion of politics and emotional religiosity. This hostility partly explains why Chaudhuri remained intellectually isolated within post-independence literary culture. In a nation where Gandhi occupied an almost sacred symbolic position, Chaudhuri's criticisms appeared provocative, even sacrilegious.

Yet *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* is not merely an attack on nationalism. The work is fundamentally shaped by a larger sense of historical disintegration. Chaudhuri repeatedly portrays India during the final decades of colonial rule as a society losing intellectual coherence and civic discipline. Public life appears increasingly dominated by ideological extremism, communal hostility, and political opportunism. Crowds and political movements are often

represented through imagery of emotional excess and irrational energy. Such descriptions reveal Chaudhuri's profound distrust of mass politics and his fear of collective ideological conformity.

This distrust becomes especially intense in his treatment of communal violence and Partition. The riots of the 1940s, particularly the Calcutta killings and the division of Bengal, appear in the narrative as catastrophic ruptures within both history and personal memory. Chaudhuri does not depict Partition merely as a political event; he experiences it as the destruction of an entire cultural world. Bengal, which had once symbolized intellectual cosmopolitanism and cultural refinement, now becomes associated with displacement, violence, and fragmentation. The emotional force of these passages derives from the sense that the world which shaped Chaudhuri's identity—the liberal environment of colonial Calcutta and the intellectual ethos of the Bengali Renaissance—had become irretrievably lost.

His reflections on Partition also deepen the recurring theme of exile. Although Chaudhuri had long been intellectually estranged from nationalist politics, the violence of Partition transformed that estrangement into something more existential. The collapse of familiar cultural and geographical landscapes intensified his sense of not belonging within the newly emerging nation-state. In this respect, the work records both a political crisis and a psychological one. History itself becomes a source of alienation. The figure of Jawaharlal Nehru occupies a similarly complex position in the narrative. Chaudhuri acknowledges Nehru's intellectual sophistication and cosmopolitan education, qualities he found largely absent in other nationalist leaders. Nevertheless, he ultimately portrays Nehru as politically naïve and excessively idealistic. In Chaudhuri's view, Nehru's secular socialism and faith in democratic modernity underestimated the deep communal and regional fractures within Indian society. Such criticism reflects Chaudhuri's broader skepticism regarding the possibility of constructing stable national identity through political idealism alone.

Stylistically, *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* differs significantly from the reflective and often lyrical tone of *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*. The prose here becomes denser, more argumentative, and historically expansive. Chaudhuri writes less as a memoirist and more as a civilizational critic attempting to diagnose the failures of modern history. Yet beneath the intellectual severity of the work lies a growing sense of despair. He increasingly presents himself as an isolated observer watching the collapse of values he considered essential to civilized life—historical continuity, intellectual rigor, cultural refinement, and rational public discourse. This condition of intellectual isolation reflects the broader crisis of colonial consciousness examined by Frantz Fanon. Fanon argues that colonial education often produces intellectuals suspended uneasily between indigenous culture and European epistemological frameworks (Fanon 176). Chaudhuri exemplifies this condition, though in a uniquely self-aware form. Unlike many postcolonial intellectuals who sought reconciliation through nationalism or cultural recovery, he openly embraced his alienation and transformed it into a mode of intellectual identity. His attachment to European humanism became stronger precisely as his faith in contemporary political culture weakened. At the same time, the work also reveals the limitations of Chaudhuri's own ideological position. His admiration for order, hierarchy, and classical civilization occasionally pushes his analysis toward excessive cultural pessimism and elitism. He frequently underestimates the democratic aspirations and anti-colonial energies that shaped nationalist politics. Nevertheless, even his harshest judgments emerge from a genuine anxiety about the collapse of intellectual seriousness and historical continuity within modern mass society.

The concluding sections of *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* move increasingly beyond immediate political commentary toward broader reflections on civilization and decline. Chaudhuri gradually imagines himself not as part of a national community but as a solitary custodian of a disappearing

intellectual tradition. The Latin phrase *Credo ut intelligam* ("I believe so that I may understand"), which becomes central to his later writings, encapsulates this self-fashioning. Identity, for Chaudhuri, becomes less geographical than civilizational—rooted not in national belonging but in literature, philosophy, and inherited intellectual culture. Ultimately, *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* transforms political history into a meditation on fragmentation, displacement, and the uncertain fate of the colonial intellectual after empire. The work reveals a consciousness unable to reconcile itself either with the emotional energies of anti-colonial nationalism or with the unstable realities of postcolonial nationhood. Chaudhuri's critique may often appear severe and deeply conservative, yet its emotional intensity derives from a profound sense of cultural loss. His narrative records not only the collapse of imperial authority but also the disintegration of the intellectual world through which he once understood both India and Europe. In doing so, the text exposes the enduring psychological tensions produced by colonial modernity and the tragic instability of identities formed at the intersection of empire, memory, and cultural aspiration.

England, Imagination, and the Search for Civilizational Belonging in *A Passage to England:*

Among the writings of Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *A Passage to England* (1959) occupies a particularly significant position because it marks the moment when an imagined cultural homeland becomes a lived geographical reality. Written after Chaudhuri's first journey to England in 1955, the work records not merely a travel experience but the culmination of a lifelong intellectual longing. For decades England had existed for Chaudhuri primarily through literature, history, philosophy, and cultural memory. His encounter with the country therefore carries a symbolic and psychological significance far greater than ordinary travel writing. The text becomes a meditation on the relationship between imagination and reality, textual inheritance and physical experience, belonging and estrangement. The title consciously echoes A Passage to India by E. M. Forster, yet the ideological movement of Chaudhuri's narrative differs sharply from Forster's novel. While Forster dramatizes the impossibility of genuine understanding between colonizer and colonized under imperial conditions, Chaudhuri imagines England as a space of intellectual intimacy and cultural recognition. For him, England is not a foreign land to be deciphered but a civilizational landscape already inhabited through years of reading and imaginative immersion. The journey therefore resembles a form of return rather than discovery. Reflecting upon his arrival, Chaudhuri observes that he had long known England "through literature and history before seeing it with the eyes" (Chaudhuri 14). Such statements reveal the extent to which English culture had already become internalized within his consciousness.

This sense of familiarity structures the descriptive texture of the narrative. England is rarely presented as a purely immediate or sensory reality; instead, landscapes, buildings, and institutions are constantly mediated through literary memory and historical association. The English countryside evokes the poetry of William Wordsworth and the paintings of John Constable, while London appears through associations with imperial history, parliamentary tradition, and classical architecture. Even ordinary scenes acquire symbolic depth because they confirm a world already constructed within Chaudhuri's imagination. Geography becomes meaningful precisely because it corresponds to a pre-existing intellectual and aesthetic framework. This mode of perception demonstrates the powerful influence of colonial education upon cultural imagination. As Edward Said argues, imperial culture frequently produces forms of imaginative affiliation in which colonized subjects internalize metropolitan literary and historical traditions as part of their own intellectual identity (Said 25). Chaudhuri exemplifies this process with unusual intensity. England exists for him not merely as a political nation-state but as a repository of civilization, continuity, and cultural refinement. His admiration is directed less

toward British power than toward the historical coherence he associates with English intellectual life.

Throughout the text, Chaudhuri repeatedly contrasts England with postcolonial India. English society appears orderly, disciplined, and historically self-aware, while India is often portrayed as fragmented, emotionally unstable, and disconnected from historical continuity. Railway stations, museums, libraries, universities, and churches become symbols of an organic civilization in which the past remains actively integrated into everyday life. Reflecting upon English historical consciousness, Chaudhuri remarks that in England "the past survives not as ruin but as living continuity" (112). Such observations reveal his belief that civilization depends upon a sustained relationship between memory, institutions, and public culture. This admiration also reflects his broader commitment to European humanism and Enlightenment rationalism. England becomes, within the narrative, a symbolic alternative to the political uncertainty and cultural fragmentation he associated with independent India. The attraction lies not simply in aesthetics but in the perceived unity between education, historical memory, intellectual discipline, and civic life. Chaudhuri repeatedly suggests that English civilization achieved a balance between tradition and modernity that postcolonial India had failed to attain.

Yet beneath the celebratory tone of the travel narrative lies a more complicated emotional reality. The England that Chaudhuri encounters is never entirely identical to the England he had imagined through books and historical memory. Although the journey initially appears to fulfill his intellectual aspirations, subtle tensions throughout the text reveal the fragility of his sense of belonging. His relationship to England remains mediated through acquired knowledge rather than inherited cultural rootedness. He can interpret English history with remarkable intimacy, yet he simultaneously recognizes that his attachment to the culture is fundamentally textual and aspirational. This awareness produces a quiet but persistent anxiety within the narrative. Chaudhuri's admiration often depends upon idealization, particularly of Victorian and Edwardian values associated with imperial confidence, classical education, and aristocratic refinement. However, post-war England had already begun to undergo major social and cultural transformations. The decline of empire, the democratization of social institutions, and the rise of consumer culture were reshaping British identity in ways that unsettled Chaudhuri's civilizational imagination. Although *A Passage to England* does not yet express the deep pessimism of his later writings, moments of unease emerge whenever modern England fails to correspond fully to the literary and historical world he reveres.

The contrast between imagined England and contemporary England reveals one of the central contradictions of Chaudhuri's intellectual life. His attachment was directed less toward historical Britain in flux than toward an idealized cultural construct preserved through literature and memory. England functions simultaneously as a real geographical location and as a symbolic refuge from the political anxieties of postcolonial India. The more intensely Chaudhuri idealizes English civilization, the more uncertain his own location within it becomes. This condition closely resembles Homi K. Bhabha's analysis of colonial ambivalence, where the colonized subject inhabits a space between identification and exclusion (Bhabha 122). Chaudhuri moves through England not as a detached tourist but as an intellectual seeking confirmation of an imagined civilizational belonging. Yet the very intensity of this desire exposes the impossibility of complete assimilation. England remains emotionally familiar yet historically distant, culturally intimate yet socially inaccessible.

At several points, the narrative subtly acknowledges Chaudhuri's outsider status. His observations often carry the perspective of a highly self-conscious interpreter attempting to decode social customs and cultural habits with scholarly precision. Even his admiration

occasionally contains traces of insecurity, as though he were measuring himself against an ideal of refinement that he simultaneously venerates and recognizes as unattainable. This emotional complexity prevents the work from collapsing into simple Anglophilic celebration. Beneath the elegance and wit of the prose lies a deeper meditation on exile, longing, and the fragile human desire for cultural belonging. The travel narrative therefore occupies a crucial transitional position within Chaudhuri's intellectual development. In *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* and *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!*, England largely functions as an imagined intellectual homeland contrasted with the perceived failures of Indian society. In *A Passage to England*, however, the imagined homeland acquires material presence, forcing Chaudhuri to confront the distance between literary imagination and historical reality. The journey briefly appears to resolve his divided consciousness, yet it ultimately intensifies it by exposing the unstable foundations of his cultural self-identification.

Thus , *A Passage to England* transcends the conventional boundaries of travel writing and becomes a profound exploration of memory, desire, and civilizational longing. The work reveals the psychological consequences of constructing identity through cultural admiration rather than geographical inheritance. Chaudhuri's England is less a nation than an imaginative sanctuary shaped by literature, history, and intellectual aspiration. Yet because this sanctuary exists largely within the realm of textual and cultural memory, it cannot fully satisfy the emotional need for belonging. The narrative therefore anticipates the deeper disillusionment of Chaudhuri's later writings, where even the idealized West begins to lose the coherence and permanence he once attributed to it.

Civilizational Decline and Double Alienation in *Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse:*

The final phase of Nirad C. Chaudhuri's intellectual journey reaches its most pessimistic and philosophically complex expression in *Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse* (1997). Written during the closing years of his life after his permanent settlement in Oxford, the work represents the culmination of decades of cultural reflection, historical anxiety, and civilizational critique. If Chaudhuri's earlier writings reveal his estrangement from postcolonial India and his admiration for European intellectual culture, this final work records the collapse of the very civilization in which he had once sought spiritual refuge. The result is a profound condition of double alienation: Chaudhuri becomes simultaneously detached from the India he had long criticized and disillusioned with the modern West he had spent a lifetime idealizing. The historical context of the book is essential to understanding its emotional and intellectual atmosphere. By the time Chaudhuri settled permanently in England in 1970, Britain had already undergone dramatic social and cultural transformation. The imperial order that had shaped his imagination was steadily disappearing under the pressures of decolonization, consumer capitalism, mass democracy, and technological modernity. The post-war decades witnessed the decline of aristocratic authority, the weakening of classical educational traditions, and the rise of popular mass culture. For Chaudhuri, these developments represented not simply social change but the disintegration of an entire civilizational ethos grounded in hierarchy, intellectual rigor, historical continuity, and aesthetic discipline.

The title *Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse* itself conveys the intensity of Chaudhuri's cultural pessimism. Drawing upon biblical imagery, the work imagines modern civilization moving toward moral and intellectual catastrophe. Chaudhuri identifies three destructive forces shaping the contemporary world: aggressive nationalism, excessive individualism, and mass democracy. In his view, these forces had weakened the cultural foundations of both Western and non-Western societies by replacing intellectual seriousness with political populism and historical consciousness with consumerist immediacy. Reflecting upon the modern condition, Chaudhuri

argues that civilization had begun to surrender "its standards of discipline and continuity to the tyranny of mass appetite" (Chaudhuri 64). The apocalyptic tone of the text emerges from his belief that twentieth-century modernity had entered a stage of irreversible cultural exhaustion. One of the most striking features of the work is Chaudhuri's changing perception of England. In *A Passage to England*, the country had appeared as a living embodiment of cultural continuity and civilizational refinement. In *Three Horsemen*, however, that image begins to fracture. Oxford still retained traces of the classical intellectual world he admired, yet beyond these remnants Chaudhuri increasingly perceived a society surrendering to vulgarization, historical amnesia, and spiritual decline. Educational institutions, public discourse, and social values appeared progressively disconnected from the traditions that had once produced Europe's intellectual greatness. The England he encountered no longer resembled the world preserved in the literature and historical imagination that had shaped his consciousness.

This disillusionment reveals the central irony of Chaudhuri's intellectual life. Throughout his career, he had criticized India for abandoning rationalism, discipline, and historical seriousness. Yet when he finally settled in the West, he discovered that Europe itself was moving away from the ideals he associated with it. The England he had carried within his imagination—a world shaped by Shakespearean grandeur, Victorian moral confidence, imperial authority, and classical scholarship—had largely ceased to exist. His migration therefore did not resolve his alienation; instead, it intensified it by exposing the distance between literary memory and historical reality. The emotional force of the work derives largely from this confrontation between imagination and lived experience. For Chaudhuri, Europe had never been merely geographical. It represented an intellectual order sustained by continuity between literature, philosophy, education, and public life. His devotion was directed less toward modern Britain as a political state than toward an idealized vision of European civilization preserved through books, art, and historical memory. Consequently, the decline of Europe appears in the text not simply as political transformation but as spiritual disintegration. The loss becomes deeply personal because the civilization he mourns had become inseparable from his own intellectual identity.

At the same time, the work reveals how deeply Chaudhuri's consciousness remained shaped by the contradictions of colonial modernity. His lifelong attempt to construct identity through elective cultural affiliation ultimately confronts a fundamental limitation: civilizations themselves are historically unstable. The cultural world to which he attached himself could not remain frozen within the idealized forms preserved through literature and memory. Modernity transformed Europe just as profoundly as it transformed India. This realization leaves Chaudhuri in a uniquely tragic position. He belongs emotionally to a civilization that no longer exists historically. The atmosphere of exile permeates the entire text. Unlike many diasporic writers who negotiate multiple identities through hybridity or cultural synthesis, Chaudhuri increasingly withdraws into intellectual solitude. His prose often assumes the tone of a final witness recording the disappearance of a civilization. This posture gives the work a distinctly elegiac quality. The narrative voice no longer seeks reconciliation with modernity but instead documents its perceived moral and cultural decline with austere detachment. Such reflections reveal not only nostalgia but also a profound fear that historical continuity itself has become impossible in the modern world. This condition closely resembles Edward Said's understanding of exile as a form of intellectual estrangement from stable structures of belonging and cultural certainty (Said 173). Yet Chaudhuri's exile differs from conventional diasporic narratives because it originates less in physical migration than in intellectual history itself. His alienation was already fully formed long before he left India; Oxford merely exposed the full consequences of a consciousness shaped by colonial education and civilizational idealization.

The philosophical significance of *Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse* therefore lies in its recognition of historical impermanence. Throughout his career, Chaudhuri searched for permanence within culture, literature, and civilizational memory. Yet his final work reluctantly acknowledges that civilizations themselves remain vulnerable to decline, fragmentation, and transformation. The intellectual certainties that once sustained his imagination—Empire, classical humanism, liberal rationalism, and historical continuity—appear increasingly fragile within late twentieth-century modernity. This awareness intensifies the tragic dimension of Chaudhuri's intellectual identity. He becomes a figure formed by one historical epoch while condemned to live in another. Neither nationalist India nor post-imperial England could fully accommodate the values to which he remained devoted. His writings thus reveal the loneliness of the colonial intellectual who survives the collapse of the world that shaped his consciousness. Unlike nationalist writers who found emotional grounding within collective political identity, Chaudhuri remained suspended between incompatible civilizational inheritances without fully belonging to either.

Moreover, the work complicates simplistic understandings of colonial influence in Indian literature. Chaudhuri cannot be reduced to a passive admirer of Europe because his final critique is directed equally against modern Western civilization. His disappointment with contemporary England demonstrates that his intellectual allegiance was ultimately directed toward an ideal of civilization rather than toward any specific nation-state. The tragedy of his position lies precisely in the realization that the civilization he idealized had itself become historically unstable. So, *Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse* stands as the final and most powerful expression of Chaudhuri's lifelong meditation on alienation, memory, and civilizational decline. The work transforms cultural criticism into a broader philosophical reflection on the fragility of historical continuity and the impossibility of absolute belonging in the aftermath of empire. By tracing the collapse of both colonial India and imperial Europe within his own consciousness, Chaudhuri emerges as a profoundly tragic witness to the psychological and historical fractures produced by modernity itself.

Discussion:

The writings of Nirad C. Chaudhuri occupy a uniquely complex position within Indian literary and intellectual history because they resist simple ideological classification. He has often been dismissed as an unapologetic defender of empire and, at the same time, celebrated as a fiercely independent cosmopolitan intellectual. Both interpretations contain partial truths, yet neither fully explains the contradictions and emotional tensions that shape his work. A closer examination of his major writings reveals that Chaudhuri's intellectual project is fundamentally structured by the conflict between geography and imagination, historical belonging and civilizational aspiration. His works repeatedly return to the unresolved question of whether identity can be constructed through intellectual allegiance alone, independent of geographical rootedness or collective national memory. Across his autobiographical, political, and travel writings, Chaudhuri consistently privileges civilization over nationality as the foundation of identity. For him, the highest forms of culture emerge not from territorial belonging but from intellectual discipline, historical consciousness, and aesthetic refinement. This belief explains his lifelong admiration for European civilization, particularly the liberal humanist traditions associated with England. Yet his engagement with Europe was never merely political or superficial. He was drawn less toward imperial authority itself than toward what he perceived as the ethical and intellectual foundations of European culture—rational inquiry, literary continuity, institutional order, and historical self-awareness. Reflecting upon the influence of colonial education, Chaudhuri suggests that English culture offered his generation "a standard of

intellectual seriousness" absent from the emotionalism of modern political life (Chaudhuri, *Autobiography* 201).

At the same time, his writings expose the psychological instability of identities constructed through elective cultural affiliation. Chaudhuri's attachment to Europe depends heavily upon idealization. The England he venerates often exists more vividly in literature, memory, and historical imagination than in lived reality. Consequently, when modern Britain fails to correspond to this inherited image, admiration gradually transforms into disappointment and cultural pessimism. This tension becomes especially visible in his later writings, where the decline of imperial Britain and the expansion of mass democratic culture produce a profound sense of civilizational loss. Such contradictions place Chaudhuri within the broader intellectual crisis of colonial modernity. Colonial education created subjects who internalized metropolitan cultural values while remaining geographically and historically separated from the civilizations they admired. As Frantz Fanon observes, colonial intellectuals frequently experience a fractured consciousness shaped simultaneously by attraction and estrangement (Fanon 176). Chaudhuri exemplifies this condition with unusual intensity. However, unlike many postcolonial writers who attempt to recover indigenous identity through nationalism or cultural reclamation, he openly embraces his distance from collective political belonging. Alienation, in his writings, becomes not a condition to overcome but a mode of intellectual self-definition.

This self-conscious detachment also explains Chaudhuri's controversial relationship with Indian nationalism. His criticism of nationalist politics emerges not merely from colonial loyalty but from a deep distrust of ideological mass movements and emotional populism. He viewed the decline of the Bengali Renaissance and the rise of mass politics as signs of cultural regression rather than democratic progress. In his interpretation, anti-colonial nationalism increasingly privileged sentiment over rational inquiry and symbolic mobilization over intellectual seriousness. Such views made him deeply unpopular within post-independence literary culture, where nationalism often functioned as both political ideology and moral legitimacy.

Yet even Chaudhuri's harshest criticisms reveal a persistent anxiety about civilization itself rather than a simple rejection of India. His writings repeatedly express fear regarding the erosion of historical continuity, intellectual rigor, and cultural memory in the modern world. This concern explains why his later works become equally critical of contemporary Western society. The Europe he admired gradually appears fragmented by consumerism, cultural democratization, and spiritual exhaustion. Consequently, Chaudhuri occupies a liminal position between two worlds without fully belonging to either. India appeared to him historically chaotic and emotionally excessive, while modern Europe increasingly seemed culturally exhausted and detached from the classical traditions he revered.

This condition of double alienation becomes the defining feature of his literary identity. Unlike many postcolonial writers who celebrate hybridity or cultural synthesis, Chaudhuri never attempts reconciliation between East and West. Instead, his writings dramatize the emotional burden of existing permanently between incompatible civilizational inheritances. His intellectual consciousness remains suspended between memory and displacement, admiration and disappointment, belonging and exile. In this regard, Chaudhuri differs significantly from many other Indian English writers of the twentieth century. Writers such as R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, and Raja Rao attempted, in different ways, to negotiate a balance between indigenous traditions and modern literary forms. Chaudhuri, by contrast, remained deeply skeptical of cultural synthesis. His prose repeatedly constructs sharp distinctions between civilization and disorder, intellectual rigor and emotionalism, historical continuity and cultural decay. This

tendency occasionally pushes his analysis toward excessive elitism and pessimism, yet it also gives his work a rare intensity and philosophical seriousness.

Moreover, Chaudhuri complicates simplistic understandings of colonial influence in Indian literature. He cannot be reduced either to a passive imitator of Europe or to a victim of colonial ideology. His engagement with Western intellectual traditions was rigorous, active, and often critically independent. Indeed, some of his sharpest critiques are directed toward the modern West itself. By the end of his life, he had become disillusioned not only with postcolonial India but also with the Europe he had idealized for decades. This final disillusionment transforms his work from political commentary into something more existential and philosophical.

Seen in this light, Chaudhuri emerges as a profoundly tragic intellectual figure. His lifelong search for civilizational belonging ultimately leads not to resolution but to deeper estrangement. The values that shaped his consciousness—Empire, classical humanism, Enlightenment rationalism, historical continuity, and liberal intellectual culture—gradually lose their authority within the modern world. He becomes, in effect, a survivor of a vanished intellectual order. His alienation is therefore historical as much as psychological: he belongs to a cultural world that modernity itself has rendered obsolete.Yet it is precisely this condition of displacement that gives Chaudhuri's writings their continuing relevance. In an age increasingly shaped by migration, fractured identities, globalization, and contested cultural memories, his work raises enduring questions about the nature of belonging and the emotional consequences of intellectual exile. His writings remind readers that cultural identity is rarely stable or singular; it is often shaped by conflicting inheritances, historical ruptures, and unresolved desires for continuity. Chaudhuri's importance lies not in the correctness of his political judgments but in his ability to articulate, with remarkable honesty and stylistic force, the loneliness and uncertainty produced by life at the crossroads of civilizations.

Conclusion:

The literary and intellectual career of Nirad C. Chaudhuri remains one of the most complex and controversial responses to colonial modernity in twentieth-century Indian literature. Across *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!*, *A Passage to England*, and *Three Horsemen of the New Apocalypse*, Chaudhuri constructs a deeply personal yet historically significant meditation on cultural identity, civilizational memory, and intellectual alienation. His writings reveal the psychological consequences of inhabiting a world shaped simultaneously by colonial education, nationalist transformation, and the decline of European imperial culture.

Unlike many postcolonial writers who sought to recover cultural rootedness through nationalism or indigenous revivalism, Chaudhuri consistently located identity within the sphere of intellectual and civilizational affiliation. His admiration for European humanism, Enlightenment rationalism, and classical literary culture shaped both his prose style and his understanding of history. Yet this elective cultural alignment also distanced him from the political and emotional currents of post-independence India. The result was a persistent sense of estrangement that gradually became central to his literary identity. Reflecting upon his intellectual position, Chaudhuri repeatedly presents himself not as a representative of national consciousness but as a solitary observer situated outside the ideological certainties of his age. At the same time, his writings demonstrate the inherent instability of identities founded primarily upon idealized cultural imagination. The Europe he revered existed largely as a textual and historical construct shaped by literature, philosophy, and imperial memory. When he finally encountered the realities of post-war England, he discovered a civilization already transformed by democratization, consumer culture, and modern social change. Consequently, his search for

belonging culminated not in reconciliation but in deeper disillusionment. He became alienated both from the India he criticized and from the modern West he had idealized for decades. This condition of double alienation emerges as the defining emotional structure of his later writings.

The significance of Chaudhuri's work therefore lies not merely in its controversial political judgments but in its exploration of the fractured consciousness produced by colonial modernity. His writings illuminate the emotional costs of constructing identity through borrowed cultural genealogies while remaining geographically and historically displaced from them. In this regard, his intellectual trajectory closely reflects what Frantz Fanon describes as the divided psychology of the colonial intellectual who internalizes metropolitan cultural values while remaining estranged from both indigenous society and imperial structures (Fanon 176). Yet Chaudhuri differs from many postcolonial writers because he refuses to resolve this contradiction through nationalism, hybridity, or cultural synthesis. Instead, he transforms alienation itself into a mode of intellectual existence. This refusal to seek reconciliation gives Chaudhuri's work its distinctive philosophical intensity. His writings repeatedly question whether modern civilization can sustain historical continuity, intellectual seriousness, and cultural memory in an age increasingly dominated by mass politics, consumerism, and ideological polarization. Such anxieties occasionally lead him toward excessive pessimism and cultural elitism, yet they also reveal a profound concern with the fate of civilization itself. Even his harshest critiques of India ultimately emerge from a broader fear regarding the erosion of intellectual and moral coherence within modernity. Moreover, Chaudhuri complicates simplistic understandings of colonial influence in Indian literature. He cannot be reduced either to a passive admirer of Europe or to a mere defender of empire. His engagement with Western intellectual traditions was active, rigorous, and often critically independent. By the end of his life, he had become deeply disillusioned not only with postcolonial India but also with contemporary Western civilization. This final disillusionment transforms his work from political commentary into a broader meditation on historical decline and existential exile. Ultimately, Chaudhuri emerges as a profoundly tragic literary figure: an intellectual shaped by one historical epoch while condemned to witness its gradual disappearance. Neither nationalist India nor post-imperial England could fully accommodate the values to which he remained devoted. His writings therefore reveal the loneliness of the colonial intellectual suspended between incompatible civilizational inheritances without fully belonging to either. In tracing the emotional consequences of such displacement, Chaudhuri transforms personal alienation into a larger reflection on memory, belonging, and the unresolved contradictions of the postcolonial condition.

For contemporary readers, Chaudhuri's work continues to remain relevant precisely because it confronts enduring questions regarding identity, cultural inheritance, and the fragile relationship between civilization and selfhood. In an increasingly globalized yet fragmented world, his writings remind us that intellectual affiliation does not necessarily guarantee emotional belonging and that cultural memory can become both a source of meaning and a cause of exile. His literary legacy endures not because his political judgments are universally persuasive, but because his work captures with remarkable honesty and stylistic power the profound uncertainties of living between worlds, histories, and civilizations.

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