



Exploring the Writing Craft: Alexander Chee's Writing Style and Insights from Other Writers

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Abstract— *The present paper explores the writing technique and style while drawing on the insights from other renowned writers, including Annie Dillard, Orhan Pamuk, Amitava Kumar, William Faulkner, Deborah Isenberg, Philip Roth, and Henry James. Derived from his fiction and essays, Chee's perspectives on writing present personal yet instructive view of the writing process. By placing his approach alongside these literary figures, this study examines how writing serves both as an art and as a way of exploring the self. Themes such as, identity, political consciousness, memory and the relationship between fact and fiction are central to this paper. The paper illustrates how Chee's style corresponds with and differs from these writers. On the whole, the paper attempts to shed a light on how the integration of these writers' ideas can inform contemporary writing practices.*



Keywords— *Fiction, Non-Fiction, Art, Writing, Technique, Essays*

Alexander Chee is a Korean-American novelist, essayist, short story writer and editor. He was born on August 21, 1967 in South Kingston, Rhode Island, United States. Chee spent his childhood in Korea, Kauai, Turk, Guam and Maine. Alexander Chee is a professor of nonfiction at Dartmouth College, Hanover. In the book *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel*, some essays mainly deal with his writing craft. These essays are “The Writing Life”, “100 Things about Writing a Novel”, “The Autobiography of My Novel”, “How to Write an Autobiographical Novel” and “On Becoming an American Writer”. These pieces of writing are laden with his advice to the students of fiction and nonfiction and to the future writers. In the essay, he forwards his mentor Annie Dillard’s advice to the readers. Chee obediently followed her and made his own thinking and style of writing after learning from her. Annie taught her students to describe all the deaths, accidents and diseases at the beginning of their work where they are possible to add. “Where possible” was her rejoinder as Chee tells, it is suggestive

of adding things where they are possible to add. She focussed on the correct use of verbs. According to her, inability to use the appropriate verb leads to the use of the adverb.

He does not use the words ‘pretty’, ‘beautiful’ or ‘cute’, while describing a girl, but describes her features that shows her pretty, beautiful, and cute. He describes the girl as having “golden hair and rosy cheeks, pink lipped and fair” (*The Queen* 4). The job of a writer is to write and do that in such a manner that the reader feels the way the writer felt or wants the reader to feel. He feels that there is no need to tell the reader what to feel (*How to Write* 51). The description of the girl makes the reader imagine and understand that girl is pretty. These are the important things which make all the differences. The grammar, structure and themes are the main aspects that form the writing collaboratively. Chee was told by Annie not to add emotional language because it turns the lines grey. A good book does not tell the reader about how a character is

feeling, rather it describes the person in a manner that the reader himself understands the psyche of the character. When the writer describes everything, the reader has nothing to see. Writer should be specific about everything. For example, instead of using the word 'angry', he should describe the action of the person, which shows him angry (*How to Write* 51).

Chee recommends daily practice of writing. Chee waited tables for four years and wrote his debut novel *Edinburgh* during this time. He learnt from his job about the norms of society which later helped him in writing. He wrote *Edinburgh*, as he tells in the essay "My Parade", "On the subway, going back and forth to the restaurants, and sometimes I wrote it while at work. I still have a guest check with an outline that come to me while I waited for my section to be seated" (116).

A novel needs careful handling. When a novelist is writing a novel he feels and looks at the various faces of the novel which seem different at different levels. A novel is free to choose its duration of completion. The novel is 'a liberator' to choose its time of formation (*How to Write* 139). The story, sometimes, distracts the writer, who is in line with incomplete or unmet endings. Sometimes a writer knows the ending from the start but the novel crosses a long path to meet its ending. The novel asks a question about what the writer or reader wants from it and answers the same itself. Novel makes the reader as well as the writer feel that everything it includes is only about him. According to Chee, these things are like a trick to keep both the writer and the reader sticking to the book. In addition, a novel is a kind of lie, which enforces the reader and writer to consider it true.

Annie Dillard, in her famous book *The Writing Life* (1989), talks about the art of writing. The opening sentence of the book tells us that a sentence is the tool of a writer, which she calls 'a line of words', "when you write, you lay out a line of words. The line of words is a miner's pick, a woodcarver's gouge, a surgeon's probe" (Dillard 549). A Sentence is everything to a writer. Structure of the sentences and the arrangement of words form the basis of any writing. According to her, writing is an interesting process but is also difficult and complex to engage in. It needs a great deal of knowledge of everything. The life in writing is free from everything and also free for everything. She simply suggests that writing provides the fullest freedom, as she says in the same source, "putting a book together is interesting and exhilarating. It is sufficiently difficult and complex that it engages all our intelligence. It is life at its most free" (555). She relates writing with the act of spinning that is full of dare and interest, "the sensation of writing a book is the sensation of

spinning, blinded by love and daring" (594). Writing takes all our interest, but we are unaware of the result that is a little bit daring. Her advice to the new writers and students of creative writing follows:

One of the few things I know about writing is this; spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the book, or for another book; give it, give it all, give it now. The impulse to save something good for a better place later is the signal to spend it now. Something more will arise for later, something better. (Dillard 597)

She says that writing needs our full attention. There is nothing like saving the idea for the future project. Something better and fresh will arrive in future, here we can use Annie's idea of 'spend it all'. Chee, in an interview with *Poets & Writers*, says, "Fiction is the thing you invent to fit the shape of what you learned and nonfiction is the thing you invent to fit the shape of what you found or may be even what you can't run away from". Here he expresses the idea that fiction helps us in creating paths for the ideas developed in our mind, and what we have gained and nonfiction helps us to draw out the things that we perceive. About this difference between fiction and nonfiction, in an interview with *Dartmouth News*, he says, "I think of essays being a hunch that I then research, and fiction as being a hunch that runs away with me".

He relates writing to gardening. In a talk with the *Write or Die* Tribe he says that he writes "a bit like a gardener was moving from plant to plant..." he is very fond of gardening and it gives him the same satisfaction and peace of mind as writing does. He suggests that a writer should have the characteristics of a gardener. There should be calmness and care to handle the process of writing and the habit of moving from one plant to the other and noticing them gradually. Writing needs diversity like a garden as it is full of different species of the plants. Writing is also a collage made of diverse things that can be seen from various perspectives.

About writing an autobiographical novel, he has added a particular essay in the book *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel* with the same title. He suggests the reader to "invent something that fits the shape of what you know" and "to do this use, the situation, but not the events of your life" (246). *Edinburgh* is his semi-autobiographical novel and in this novel, he neither uses his name and identity nor does he add the events of his life but merely adds the situations. He puts Fee, the protagonist of the novel, in situations from his own life. He invents a character like him but not him, as he talks about creating

an autobiographical character, "If you are a professor, then the character is a professor. If you are tall, he is tall. Angry, then angry. But then change other things that will make the difference" (247). In the novel *The Queen of the Night*, he has used the situations from his own life. The recurring themes of identity, loneliness and struggle that run through the novel seems to be drawn from his own life.

Chee is of the view that becoming a writer is the choice of one's own self. No one can make a person a 'writer'. A teacher can only polish the skill of the student, and teach the rules and formulas of good writing. He does not know whether his students can become writers or not. It depends on the student whether he wants to be one (*How to Write* 250).

Chee finds that there are several things which may stop a writer from writing autobiographical content. There are some stories a writer wants to tell but unable to do so because of fear and hesitation. Some have fear that it may destroy their family reputation and relationship. When the imagination of creating a story fails then this fear occurs. While teaching the students of creative writing he discovered that he "needed to teach not just how to write, but how to keep writing" (*How to Write* 257). He teaches his students to "stand up and leave the room of your [student's] mind" so that one can write and live peacefully (*How to Write* 257).

In the field of writing, there are many writers known for their writing style and their guidance on writing to the aspirants. Further, this paper will explore some other important writers contributing to the craft of writing and how these writers have their own ways of writing different from the others.

Amitava Kumar is an Indian writer, journalist, and critic. He mentions, in an interview with the *Public Books*, how he learned writing without any training. In response to a question, he says that he learnt from other people by turning them into his mentors. He has read Philip Roth, but never met him. He has read works of Michael Ondaatje and met him later. He has read them with great attention. He has always wished for a mentor for himself but he found them on the bookshelf in his room, as he says, "[...] I have the books that are my models – I've got Roth, I've got Ben Lerner, I've got Teju Cole, I've got Claudia Rankine, I've got these books by Maggie Nelson. I'm learning by making them my mentors by myself" (*Public Books*). About the politics of his writing, he tells that he always focusses on the representation of ordinary life in writing and other works of art. He favours the writing which brings the different things together like a collage because it gives a fix to

contemporary reality. He considers writing to be like drawing and photography because they both produce a picture, one in the mind and the other on the paper. Therefore, the art of writing is equal to other arts because of the same characteristics. For Chee writing is gardening, and for Amitava Kumar it is like drawing and photography. It is so because every art has the same purpose of representation of life.

Orahan Pamuk, a Turkish writer, born in Istanbul is well known for his novels, which mainly carries his homeland as the major theme. His noteworthy works are *Cedet Bey and His Sons* (1982), *The Silent House* (1983), *The White Castel* (1985), *The Black Book* (1990), *The New Life* (1994), *My Name Is Red* (1998), *Snow* (2002). His book *Istanbul: Memories and the City* (2003) is about his childhood and youth and about his native place. In an interview with the *Paris Review*, he talks about his own environment of writing. He says that for writing there should be a place separate from the daily routine. He is of the view that sometimes "domestic rituals and details" kill the imagination of the writer. In daily domestic life, the mind thinks of various things, which fades the imagination. Pamuk writes at the time when he is away from home. He has a little separate place especially for writing. He had been leaving his home as an employee, and after spending the whole day out and came back home. He has worked for ten hours daily. He likes to sit and write like a child playing with toys. For him writing is work but fun and games also. He recommends a separate place and environment to give words to the imagination, without any outer obstruction. Imagination needs a special attention to get a form on the piece of paper. On the other hand, Chee is of the view that there is no special time for writing.

William Faulkner, the renowned American writer, is known for his novels, short stories, screenplays, essays, poetry and drama. He is the creator of the fictional place named Yoknapatawpha County. Most of his novels are set in this fictional place. His well-known works of fiction are *The Sound and The Fury* (1929), *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1932), and *Absalom, Absalom* (1936). In an interview with the *Paris Review*, he expresses his views on his own self as a writer. He gives all the importance to the creation of the artist i.e. the works or the novel. He says that if he had not existed, someone else would have written like him. He says that any work of art, writing, a play and a novel is more important than the writer. As he says:

The artist is of no importance. Only what he creates is important, since there is nothing new to be said. Shakespeare, Balzac, Homer, have all written about

the same things, and if they had lived one thousand or two thousand years longer, the publisher wouldn't have needed anymore since. (*Paris Review*)

He says that the individuality of the writer is important to the writer himself, and no one else cares about it. A writer is always keen to make his work better. He always wants to polish and nourish it. In his opinion:

If I [Faulkner] could write all my work again, I am convinced that I would do it better, which is the healthiest condition for an artist. That's why he [the writer] keeps on working, trying again; he believes each time that this time he will do it, bring it off. (*Paris Review*)

Faulkner considers himself as a failure poet. He thinks that maybe every novelist tries at poetry first when fails and then goes for a short story but finally picks up the novel. He says that talent, discipline, and hard work are the most important things to become a novelist. He wants the writer to never be satisfied with his work. Craving for something new and better should always be there. According to Faulkner, writer should be responsible for his art only. He needs to be ruthless for this. Faulkner is of the view that art does not need any particular environment, on the other side there is Pamuk, who needs a special place to write. Faulkner is of the view that the environment an artist needs is:

Whatever peace, whatever solitude, and whatever pleasure he can get at not too high a cost. All the wrong environment will do is run his blood pressure up; he will spend more time being frustrated or outraged. My own experience has been that the tools I need for my trade are paper, tobacco, food and a little whisky. (*Paris Review*)

Deborah Eisenberg is an American short-story writer and teacher. She is a professor of writing at Columbia University. Alexander Chee was her student. In an interview with *Paris Review*, she shares her precious views on the writing craft. To her, writing gives a feeling of peace to the writer. Writing is like therapy and it affects the mind of the writer positively. For her the real form of writing is the "experience of making a set of given yield". She says that writing has many rigid and "inflexible set of instruments" i.e. vocabulary, grammar, symbols and the limit of the power of expressing oneself. These can be made a little flexible with some effort. Eisenberg is very careful about the point of view of the writer. On this part, she says that it is like looking through a microscope and adjusting the focus on it, "everything depends upon how

close you want to bring the naked object to the naked eye.... Depends on what you want to magnify and what power" (*Paris Review*).

Philip Roth (1933-2018), an American novelist and short-story writer is well known for his autobiographical details in his fiction and for its sensual style. His noteworthy works include *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959), *American Pastoral* (1997), *The Human Stain* (2000). He was a teacher of creative writing at the University of Iowa and Princeton University. He, in an interview with *NPR* says that writing is like jumping on a trampoline. With every jumping up and coming down, a new idea arrives in the mind of the writer. When a writer sits to write, random ideas take place in his mind and change the existing ones. The work of a writer is completed only when he has nothing to say more or when he has answered all the questions that occurred in his mind during writing. He says, "Part of being a writer is being able to read what you've written and see what's missing, see what needs development, see what's suggested by what you write" (*NPR*). He suggests editing the work and adding new things according to the need of the story. In an interview with Terry Gross on *NPR*, about the beginning of the book he says:

You begin every book as an amateur and as a dummy. And in the writing, you discover the book. Of course, you're in charge. But gradually by writing sentence after sentence, the book, as it were, reveals itself through your language. (*NPR*)

There is a need to learn to sit still and to pay attention to writing. He has been quoted as saying, in *Daily Rituals* by Mason Currey:

Writing isn't hard work. It's a nightmare.... There's a tremendous uncertainty that's built into the profession, a sustained level of doubt that supports you in some way. A good doctor isn't in a battle with his work. In most professions there's beginning, a middle, and an end. With writing, it's always beginning again. Temperamentally, we need that newness. There is a lot of repetition in the work. In fact, one skill that every writer needs is the ability to sit still in the deeply uneventful business. (*Daily Rituals*)

Alexander Chee in an interview with *The Toast* was questioned about the writing of fiction and nonfiction at the same time. Chee was writing *The Queen of The Night*, and *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel* at the

same time. He responded in the favour of both that they both are important. He replied:

Both fiction and nonfiction are investigation happenings inside of limits. I do think they have different limits and that these limits matter, formally, in the way limits matter to a sestina or a sonnet. This is very reductive, but for me the differences are, in fiction, a character sets the limit and in nonfiction, the character of the author sets the limit. (*The Toast*)

Further, he says, in fiction and nonfiction the difference is that from fiction there is the demand of a "trustworthy guarantee of good time", on the other side from nonfiction a "trustworthy guarantee of wisdom". According to him, novels and essays or fiction and nonfiction can be written at the same time and it helps the writer to exist among the readers. He says that novels are sort of greedy because they need full time. If a writer only focuses on the novel at one time his career can go empty. Novels need full attention; they are not fast happening. Novel is a gradual process to be crafted beautifully. *Edinburgh* and *The Queen* are beautiful examples from his side.

Henry James, an American-British novelist and psychological realist of the age, in the essay, *The Art of Fiction* (1884), talks about the art of fiction. This essay was a response to Walter Besant's remarks on fiction in his article. For Henry James fiction is "a personal direct impression of life..." (29), and this representation of life plays an important role in the existence of the novel (25). He says that novel is like pudding that could only be swallowed and enjoyed (24). He has the view that any art lives with "discussion, upon experiment, upon curiosity, upon variety of attempt, upon the exchange of views and the comparison of standpoints..." (24). Therefore, a novel needs all this.

Further Henry James talks of the content and the form of the novel. Both the idea and the form are incomplete without the other, as James expresses, "The story and the novel, the idea and the form, are the needle and thread, and I [Henry James] never heard of a guild of tailors who recommended the use of thread without the needle, or the needle without the thread" (40). In any work of art, novel, short story, poem and play form and idea are closely woven. These are inseparable because one supports the other to give a meaningful result. As he has said that novels are the representation of life, he also has the view that moral and artistic sense are in a close relationship because the "deepest quality of a work of art will be the

quality of the mind of the producer" (44). The work of art presents the writer himself.

Alexander Chee's style of writing is an example of fine balance. He presents his own life through the character but he is not the character. Fee from *Edinburgh* tells the story of Chee, but he is not Chee. *The Queen of the Night* raises the struggle to come out of the difficult situations and the quest for identity. Here the protagonist is female, having a struggle in mind and in real life, it shows many similarities. In the book *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel*, he presents a balanced craft of writing. Here he tells the story from childhood to becoming a successful writer. While presenting his own journey of life, he is also a teacher of writing through the book. The book helps the reader with his biographical details and teaches them how to write the novel and the essays.

Alexander Chee, from his works, shows some of the most important facts of writing. From the book of the essays, we understand that a writer should discuss or speak about everything in his life through the writing. In *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel*, the essays show every aspect of his life from his childhood to his adulthood, whether it deals with the inferiority because of his race, face and sexual identity. He follows the rule of speaking freely because art is free from everything, so he writes what he wants to write instead of what other people want him to write. He writes his own thoughts while keeping the reader in mind always. In the essay "The Curse", he talks about his desire and attraction for men. He may hide it because of the fear of society, but he writes his mind and heart on paper truthfully and he narrates everything about life. He teaches his students to write not like him but like their own self, as Annie taught him, not to write like her but their own self. Chee, in a way, is suggesting to the readers and writers that writing is an adequate way to express your life to the people.

Alexander Chee's approach to writing, deeply introspective and politically conscious, offers a compelling model for understanding the craft. By examining his work alongside the insights of writers such as Annie Dillard, Amitava Kumar, Orhan Pamuk, William Faulkner, Deborah Isenberg, Philip Roth, and Henry James, this study highlights the multifaceted nature of storytelling. Chee's ability to blend personal narrative with broader historical and cultural themes mirrors the techniques of these literary figures while also forging a distinct path. His reflections on memory, identity, and the role of the writer underscore the transformative power of literature.

To conclude, this paper reveals that writing is both an art and an act of engagement—with the self, with

history, and with society. Chee's craft exemplifies how writers navigate the intersection of truth and imagination, demonstrating that storytelling is not merely a means of expression but a way of understanding the world. By integrating the techniques and philosophies of these writers, contemporary authors can continue to evolve the literary landscape, using the written word as both a mirror and a lens.

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