

Socio-Cultural Aspects in Amit Chaudhuri's *A New World*

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Abstract

Amit Chaudhuri's novels deal with the issues of identity crisis, problems faced on migration and diaspora which are the prominent themes of postcolonial literatures. This paper tries to explore the socio-cultural aspects which Amit Chaudhuri has sketched out in his novel *A New World*. As a regional writer he has captured the cultural ethos of middle class Bengali people. His works often deal with the ordinary people's life, customs, habits, manners, traditions, rituals, languages and life-style of his own region.

Keywords: postcolonial, socio-cultural, diaspora, traditional, orthodox, modernization.

Amit Chaudhuri's novels deal with the issues of identity crisis, problems faced on migration and diaspora which are the prominent themes of postcolonial literatures. Chaudhuri's concern with socio-cultural aspects is traceable in his fictional as well as in non-fictional writings. The study of socio-cultural features in the novels of Amit Chaudhuri shows the characters and the ways in which they think, feel, respond and articulate. The social and personal interactions bond the characters to the particular region in which they lead their lives.

The socio-cultural aspects are used as the background support in his works. It plays a vital role in the development of the plot and characterization. The society oriented cultural elements participate in the works of Chaudhuri with all its aspects: nature, culture, legend, customs, conventions, superstitions, topography and environment.

Chaudhuri presents a frame of cultural dominance in the novel *A New World*. He has been awarded Sahitya Academy for this deputed novel. It bestows the dilemma of how native Indian estranged from his country, culture, language, parents, and wife pursue success in post-colonial world. He carefully illuminates the expressions of the wonderful things that hide in the ordinary things. Chaudhuri's images are drawn from his wide expression of real life experience so minutely observed, they are charged with poetic sense.

Chaudhuri sets the main plot of the novel so clear. The outlook of the story is narrow and the protagonist of the novel Jayojit (Joy) comes to Calcutta with his son, a

seven year old boy, visits his parents during vacation in the month of April. He wants to eradicate the memories of his divorce from Amala. The sequential anecdote of this novel opens with Jayojit, a Bengali economist, teaching in America. He has very recently divorced his wife. She is also a Bengali from Calcutta, left him and eloped with a gynecologist who lives in America.

Chaudhuri beautifully depicts the relationship between the parents and children in *A New World*. Jayojit's father is a retired Admiral in the Indian Navy. After the retired life, the old man and his wife count every penny of their dwindling savings. The retired Admiral is a kind of stingy person, who always roams towards the bank by bus because he can no longer afford a chauffeur for his battered old car. At the same time, when Jayojit wants to buy a washing machine for his mother, his father objects. His mother seems to be disappointed, but she never talks against her husband's will. It's a kind of strong sentiment exists in the Indian tradition. It develops the social respect and dominance that highlighted during 1980's in Calcutta.

Jayojit's father is not always fond of his wife but they depend on each other. Jayojit's mother emotionally attracts her grandson and tries to pamper him, her husband and son. Jayojit's parents ask him to postpone his return to America and they request him to stay on. This shows the different pattern of relationships in upper-middle class Bengali household where the emotional bond is replaced by formal decency.

The impact of modernization and western culture leads to weaken the family-ties. The story begins with the

arrival of father and son to his parents' apartment by a taxi from the airport and the story ends with the two of them on a plane after his parents send off them. As the two of them get seated in the flight, it is clear Jayojit isn't coming back to India for recapturing his happiness in the native land rather he finds a new life in America. "The city irritated him- yet he had decided that it would give him the space for recoupment" (51). The novel ends with Jayojit's evacuation with his son for Claremont in the States. His son stays with him till the end of July and goes to his mother, who is living with her boyfriend without marrying him.

Jayojit travels by Bangladesh Biman, a low-cost airplane and reaches his father's flat which is located in the middle-class locality of Calcutta. Two or three part-time maid servants sitting by the entrance looks Jayojit and Bonny's arrival. The flat is set on the fourth floor of the apartment, number '4', a long corridor lead to it, and then becomes a kind of verandah before it and its neighbouring flat. The nameplate on the door said Anand Chatterjee. Jayojit and Bonny are welcomed by Mrs. Chatterjee. Chaudhuri points out that Jayojit is traditional person, however he is living in America, never forgets his tradition and culture of India. It is evident when he touches his mother's feet in order to give her respect. He teaches Bonny the same cultural and traditional values. He says to Bonny, "Pranam Karo Bonny, pay your respect" (6).

The children in the west are very much independent. When Jayojit's mother wants Bonny to take bath, he feels shy and says that he can take bath by himself. Bonny feels that grandparents pleasing the children is exclusively a peculiar activity found in India and that is revealed by Chaudhuri through this small incident. Thus he juxtaposes the grandmother's wish which is age-old traditional and Bonny's reaction which is modern. Chaudhuri represents the differences in two cultures that clearly exhibit in the thoughts and feelings of Bonny. This denotes the prominence of culture and tradition which Chaudhuri takes for the second generation, implicit through the grandson Bonny and his sense of nostalgic traces over framed through diaspora content.

Jayojit's parents mostly don't make much companion with relatives or friends. They use to keep in touch with only closest relatives and friends. They exclude themselves from the world of constringent in order to avoid the interrogation about the divorce of Jayojit. Even with their

neighbours, they do not maintain the friendly relationship. They feel accusable though they are not the reason for their divorce. Chaudhuri depicts the attitude of the Admiral and his wife and brings out the real healing of Indian families who follow India's traditional way of life,

This novel proclaims repeatedly the same contrast between the way of Indian traditional life and modern west. In U.S.A, the divorce is a common one caused by mutual understanding, where society or neighboring people won't even consider and gossip about the issue whereas in India neighbors and relatives are very eager to swing on others issues.

Jayojit's diasporic agony and his failed marriage make him to stuck with his past life of Amala right from the first day of their meeting to the last moment of their separation. The marriage is a traditional and orthodox one. Every ritual of Hindu Brahmin marriage is adapted and progressed, but some marriages yet ends in failure.

Jayojit and Amala have gone to America after their marriage. She is not consciously wearing orthodox sari all along the way. She remodels her costumes into jeans in the airport and she says to Jayojit, "Can you believe it, it's the first time I'm going abroad?" (141). In fact, in eighties, travelling to the west is not common and also more surprised for middle class people. In the beginning of their married-life, Amala is delightful, quite amused and excited as they travel to Niagara Falls, Toronto and other places in America. She could not adopt the heat of Arlington and compares it to that of Calcutta.

Amala is delighted being a house wife and often made telephone calls to her parents. However, she regrets the pain of being far away from her parents, relatives and friends. She is not happy and excited in the beginning of their married life, "The satisfaction of life had made her clear sighted: Jayojit, you're too cynical. Baba, you know you're here for the money and the good life like the rest of us! What's wrong with that?" (142). It is the experience of expatriate in the beginning years; later Jayojit has less interest in life.

Jayojit is hopeless, although physically attractive and financially secured. He has done what is supposedly correct, but his life turns out wrong, as he looks for too much of safety in his life. He pays a little attention to his duties and responsibilities. He is neither a good husband to Amala nor a dutiful father to Bonny. Jayojit's failure not only

affects his son but also his parents. He is not used to be with his son, and his parents withdraw themselves to their own private world. Time passes without any major events or strong emotions. The attachment of Jayojit with his neighbour is not a serious or deeper one. He has a kind of relationship with the extent of saying 'Hi- and Bye'. He feels that Calcutta becomes alien land to him, and Claremont becomes as his mother land. He also hates the heat and dust of the city. His skeptic attitude about the heat and dust of the city is quite natural and common to any diasporic Indian.

This novel is autobiographical in nature, Chaudhuri projects himself as protagonist in some occasion, Jayojit also eliminates his twin-nature in every attitude of life. It is a kind of dilemma in which he has to keep a leg in his motherland and other at the alien land. There are many diasporic Indians like Jayojit who speaks English and living in Claremont, USA. He never wants to drop his identity of being an Indian. He wants to keep up the rich cultural heritage and the values of India.

Hence, he confines to marry an Indian girl and not an American girl. He is always afraid when he has a rational idea about the hidden danger of being 'new' or 'newness'. Though Jayojit lives in America fortuitously, favours economic liberalization, he is confined by the word 'new' and "given a choice of being born at any time in India's past, he'd have chosen to be born in the thirties, so that he could have a taste of the first years of post-Independence India" (148). Thus, the author shows his love for Indian tradition.

Both Jayojit and Amala want their son to address them as "Baba" and "Ma" though the boy is completely grown up in American culture and never knows about India. Ironically the boy calls them 'baba' and 'ma', the mother is living with another man and the father is hardly disputing in the court to take his son in his custody at least for a short period of time in a year. Debjani Ganguly rightly comments about the parents Jayojit and Amala, and the novelist, Amit Chaudhuri by stating:

When Bonny addresses his father as 'Baba', we see in it evidence of 'language' in actu (enunciation, positionality) rather than language in situ (enonce or propositionality) and the 'sign of translation that continually tells or tolls the different times and spaces between cultural authority and its per formative practice. (93)

In *A New World*, he cleverly portrays the Indian traditions and its culture. It is the tradition or custom in Bengal, father and mother call their sons as 'baba' which means 'father' and grandson as 'dadu' which means grandfather. Even though Jayojit's mother calls him 'baba' his father never calls him like that, but he calls Bonny, as 'dadu'.

Jayojit returns to Claremont with his son after spending the vacation with his parents in Calcutta. His parents arrive at the airport to send off their son and grandson. It is observed in the depiction of Chaudhuri that there are no sentiments in their departure. Jayojit and his parents seem to be very formal in departing with each other. Bonny also leaves his grandparents, possesses only with little sentiments. Jayojit is highly self-centered who gives less prominence to worldly love, sentiments and hatred. Chaudhuri has gone some fifty years back apparently around 1970s to explain the character of the Admiral. During that period, it was the tradition that men of the Indian families were too dominant. Their wives were taken as mere objects to them. They remain same till their death. However, in the modern age, tolerance, patience, adjustment among the couples are totally eradicated, finally it ends with divorce. Thus juxtaposing the Admiral and Jayojit, Amit Chaudhuri clearly confines the traditional and modern life at one point. He brings both traditions and modern things on the same cultural space to find common identity in them.

Chaudhuri also explicates the plight of retired people who basically belong to middle-class. The Admiral is a middle-class man who lives in an ordinary flat and preserves an old flat car. He exceptionally uses the car since the cost of petrol and the driver's salary cannot be affordable to the monthly pension. His pension is insufficient to the cost of living and he and his wife depends on their son for money. As the admiral ages, gains much weight, is often ill, has a stroke, suffers from diabetes and a heart condition, needs medicines, and requires support while going for walk. He complains about local politics, the incompetence of the workers and the changes in local society as non-Bengalis start enterprises and construct new buildings. He is stubborn, even enraged, when Jayojit wants to buy a washing machine for his mother. His wife is selfless and has no children to look after her, and is no longer interested in reading books or making complicated

modern food. She reverts to cook dal, vegetables, and local fish in mustard oil.

Chaudhuri proposes to forecast the tradition and culture of Calcutta. Instead he projects the life of the retired people like the Admiral and Dr. Sen gives comments on the impact of modernization. However, the tradition and rituals of India especially of Calcutta has a special cultural place in this novel. The Admiral's wife Sumitra Chatterjee, mother of Jayojit is like many other Indian house-wives of 1980s who always rounds around the Admiral. As a typical Indian mother, she always shows her love and affection on both Jayojit and Ranajit. As a grandmother, she fondly calls her grandson by calling a pet name "Bonny" though his registered name is "Vikram" which means "strong, powerful, and heroic" (33).

Sumitra Chatterjee is a dutiful mother and she shows her love and care by preparing different recipes of food items to Jayojit and Bonny. She often shouts at the servants for their irregularities. She is just like any other middle-class woman, she too has dream for modern new house-hold appliances.

A New World has a small cast of central characters, Jayojit, Bonny, the Admiral, and Mrs. Chatterjee who remains within their own protective shells. The setting is mostly limited to the family apartment except the final scenes and the time is limited with the two months of Jayojit's visit. There is no significant action. Even the memories of Jayojit about the break-up with his wife, are more allusive than dramatized. When the emotional wasteland of Jayojit are dominant his family finds its echoes with some rude activities such as threats of violence that keeps people indoors. The streets are too crowded to travel and workers are unreliable. This is not an India most writers touch, but it is the actual part of India and a part of human, passive, quietly defeated, aged and feel that the world is becoming a worse place to know that one's hopes is not realized, that family lines might die off, social status is passed.

Chaudhuri's protagonists are hesitant to enter this violent and stormy zone. Things happen as they happen in real life without any planning and expectation. There are hardly any borders between present and past and flies over the two without bothering or being certain. The characters slip in and slip out from one place to another, from memory and desire to quotidian reality, from one frame of mind to another without consciously. The novel possesses the poetic rendering of the complexity in daily life and the

personality of Jayojit as Economist and writer, who has "laid – an early and important corners tone" of "as yet unfinished, brick work of India's new economic order", who feels perturbed and puzzled by his wife who got divorce from him and living with another new economic and cultural forces swamping a Bengal cultured society.

Finally, when the reader questions about what is new in the novel, *A New World* is Chaudhuri's poetic interpretation of locality, temporality and humanity. The work of art is small but the vision is often led beyond the novelist's masterly use of Irony, suggestiveness, imagery and epiphany. The novel is clearly sketched but often ambiguous and ambivalent, like any good literary creation. *A New World* may appear to be similar as other novels of Chaudhuri but in tone and temper it is significantly different from them. It can be distinguished by itself from them by a new maturity and self –assurance in dealing with life, language and literariness.

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