

The Dialectics of Modernity: an aesthetic study of Amit Chaudhuri's *A New World*

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Abstract

Amit Chaudhuri, the post- modern Indian writer is not only a poet but also known as a man of novels and critical reviews worldwide. His novels represent Kolkata in the phase of transformation and encounters within a new order. *A New World* by Chaudhuri depicts similar episodes but in a rather confused state as the protagonist is perplexed and finds both ease and difficulty in intermingling with the people and the events that keep changing the city- both as a landscape and in spirit. This paper will attempt to highlight the disenchantment of modernity, disintegration and alienation of the self, the fractured social relationships, emotional crisis and the expression of everything unfound. It will also show the ironies and the inner tensions that act as a source of creativity along the progress of myth. The main objective will be to enquire about modern existence as a cultural and aesthetic experience where the amalgamation of modernism and the memory of a lost world results in the creation of a grey zone that is unknowable and in-between. The search will be for and within this space which is somewhere else. The aim will be to explore what is hidden beneath the manifolds of what Chaudhuri calls the “secular unconscious” i.e., “travelling between genres” where secularism does not stand against the many paradoxes that are present consciously at the heart of Indian modernity but to represent a nation that is culturally one.

Keywords: Modernity; Expectations; Memory; Myth and Culture.

Introduction:

The modern Indian English fiction has consistently agreed with the pressures of historical change, cultural memory, and global mobility. In this regard, Amit Chaudhuri has got a distinctive position as he refuses grand narratives and puts his attention to the everyday textures of middle-class urban life. His fiction is not about dramatizing modernity through spectacle. Rather, it presents modernity as a lived and aesthetic experience which is marked by silence, hesitation, and emotional restraint. *A New World* (2000) is written with this intention, foregrounding the inner turmoils faced by a diasporic subject who is caught between geographical locations, cultural inheritances, and fractured relationships.

This paper is an examination of *A New World* as a text that conveys the *dialectics of modernity* through an esthetic lens. It argues that Chaudhuri represents modern existence not as a direct succession but as a liminal, in-between condition modelled upon memory, family life, and global dislocation. His novels emphasize more on the silence of the daily life and apparently trivial moments while enabling a deeper exploration of alienation and emotional disintegration. They further result in the crisis of identity in a globalized world. By reading his fiction alongside theories of aesthetic experience and cultural modernity, it can be understood how Chaudhuri assembles a modern sensibility that is both thoughtful and culturally grounded.

Culture, Perception, and Aesthetic Modernity

The study of this paper correlates with the theories of aesthetic experience and cultural modernity, especially Arnold Berleant's concept of art as an engaged, perceptual practice rather than a detached object of contemplation. In *Art and Engagement* (1991), Berleant emphasizes that perception is culturally rooted and shaped by memory and experience. The awakening of aesthetic understanding happens from objective observation. This approach makes texts available as sites where cultural modernity can be achieved via sensual emotions.

The dialectical analysis allows the recognition of the coexistence of progress and loss as well as, of rationality and melancholy. Chaudhuri brings out the idea of the "secular unconscious," formulated through his presentation of genre and narrative movement. This secular unconsciousness starts to serve as a cultural space where modern Indian identity absorbs contradictions without resolving them. It allows paradoxes of tradition and modernity to coexist. By applying this aesthetic and cultural framework, the paper talks about *A New World* as a narrative that renders modernity not through dramatic action but through the everyday mayhem of domestic life.

The human-made element of the environment may be broadly termed as culture, which further divides into material and subjective culture. Material culture consists of attributes like attire, cuisine, shelter, infrastructures, etc. However, subjective culture is the way of one society of perceiving its social environment. It mostly examines ideas that have worked in the past and have been transmitted to newer generations. Culture assimilates economy, language, law, education,

politics, philosophy, and religion within itself. However, the aesthetic idea about how people coexist with others is also to be considered. Along with it, the untold assumptions and habits of the sample society under discussion also play a critical role in understanding and determining the modern trends in the culture.

Amit Chaudhuri and the Aesthetics of Indian Modernity

Amit Chaudhuri writes following this tradition of cultural modernity. He is a literary critic, essayist, novelist, poet and musician who celebrates Indian values coated in Bengali sensibility. His novels provide a new insight into the theoretical models of Indian domestic city. His settings exhibit the traditional modern Indian homes, interconnected with cultural practices and how they are adopted and reworked by the characters of his fictions. He challenges the conventional concepts of the region and does not let them only be mere backdrops to his work. Rather, they mingle with the plot and characterisation to maintain the extra-ordinariness of the Indian household. He represents the minute details of the everyday life with utmost sincerity and does not leave behind anything.

A New World: Narrative Structure and Modern Sensibility

The fourth novel of Amit Chaudhuri, *A New World* (2000) seeks to discuss India and its changing arrangements as it describes the tale of a modern Bengali family living in Calcutta. The narrator is Jayojit Chatterjee, a university professor of Economics, who travels to his homeland with his son, Bonny to spend the vacation. The novel details Jayojit's stay with his parents and his return to the old world that he left behind, years ago. The novel starts with his coming back to his roots and ends with his subsequent departure from it. The story is full of home-made meals, nostalgia and trips around the newly modernist city of Calcutta. Jayojit keeps comparing the age-old marriage of his parents with his recent divorce. Even Chaudhary makes sure to showcase the banalities of the middle-class people through this tale. The novel is a master example of how globalisation affects human lives. In his *Notes on the Novel after Globalisation*, he stresses that the "now" of globalisation is "inimical" to the "epiphanic" and is full of disorderly and hypothetical potential. He further states that, "Globalisation, by the turn of the millennium, had become a kind of narrative- a lateral, interconnected network, from which there was no escape..." (Chaudhuri Notes on the Novel after Globalisation)

Jayojit feels the same. He decides to stay in Calcutta for two months with Bonny to try out for his custody as the American laws had failed him. Yet, he thinks of America as a land that can fulfil his professional dreams better than his own homeland. At the end, he returns west.

In *A New World*, Chaudhuri brings out the modern sensibility of the Indian fiction via the collocatory framework of the novel. The novel is syntactical in structure, and there is no beginning, middle or end to the story. The spatialisation of time, the usage of the narrative voice and the perception of the world add the modernist touch to the story.

Fractured Relationships and the Crisis of the Modern Self

The modernist approach grows stronger through the portrayal of different familial relationships within the Chatterjee family. The impact of modernisation has led to the weakening of the family. The arrival of the protagonist is not for the capturing of old memories of the native land as “the city irritates him-yet he had decided that it would give him the space for recoulement.” (Chaudhuri 51) Even the Admiral is not so fond of his wife. Joy’s mother is often seen trying to pamper his son. There is an evident impact of westernisation. As an American, Bonny feels shy and uncomfortable, and finds the grandparents pleasing children as an exclusively peculiar activity. Even, the relationship of Jayojit’s parents with their relatives and friends is not deep. They are afraid to socialise and tend to exclude themselves from the world, so as to avoid the topic of their son’s divorce. They feel responsible for his condition and their Indianness rises to the peak when society and its norms come into play.

Gender, Individual Choice, and Modern Identity

However, through the lines of the book, we notice that the relationship in the upper-class Bengali household is more based on formal civility than on emotive bonds. Joy is constantly found to make comparisons with his parent’s traditional age-old conjugal life with his own modern and broken one. Joy and his wife, Amala shared no affection in their married life, and both remain unsatiated in their own lonely lives- within their ego and monotony. Although aware of the deep holes in their relationship, they make no efforts to rekindle the lost bond. The readers too, get to know about their marital breakup in a somewhat ordinary way:

“They had been divorced at the end of the year, before last in a bright, clean Midwestern summer; it hadn’t been an easy or even a civilised event...” (Chaudhuri 89)

Jayojit discovers that Amala is seeing her gynaecologist, who is also married. However, Amala’s transformation seems beyond Joy’s understanding.

“The satisfaction of life had made her clear sighted: Jayojit, you’re too cynical. Baba, you know you’re here for the money and good life like the rest of us! What’s wrong with that?” (Chaudhuri 142)

But for Jayojit, women tend to seek temporary solace by leaving their husbands, getting a divorce and entering a new wedlock, but all these do not guarantee a permanent solution. He thinks that real liberty can be achieved by sharing a harmonious relationship with a spouse. Amala is seen as the projection of modernity. As a modern woman, she does not want to follow the traditional norms of an arranged wedding. She does not want to remain in an uncomfortable, closed world and sacrifice herself for the sake of the family. When confronted, she says, “he was kind to me”. This shows the lack of compassion in Jayojit’s and her relationship. Jayojit has met the doctor before Bonny’s birth and he was “a not unpleasant looking man in his forties, was balding slightly and surely not charismatic, a whiff of bad breath reached Jayojit from his conversation once...”(Chaudhuri 57)

So, Jayojit keeps clinging to his marriage: “some urge to rehearse what their parents had done before they had taken hold of him, of her.” (Chaudhuri 32)

However, Amala elopes and later divorces him, leading to the bitter custody battle over their son, Bonny. The American trial chose to side with Amala and Jayojit is forced to take the alternative decision of taking the help of the Indian legal system as an NRI. Sheobhushan Shukla and Anu Shukla observes about the story:

“... A new world, where the protagonist is a mature, disillusioned sort of person and is capable of a more realistic perception of things.” (Shukla 10)

Diaspora, Belonging, and Liminal Identity

Jayojit’s emotional and delicate self is projected throughout the novel. His thoughts keep shifting back and forth between America and his home. He is accustomed to the western lifestyle, but he marries an Indian woman. Jayojit’s identity is in kind of a dilemma as he struggles to remove the dual nature of his life. He is afraid of being “new” and “given a choice of being born at any time in India’s past, he would have chosen to be born in the thirties, so that he could have a taste of the first years of post-Independence India.” (Chaudhuri 148) Jayojit and Amala converse in English, but they have retained the Indian culture of calling parents as “Baba” and “Ma” within Bonny. Ironically, the mother is living with a married man, and the father is rarely seen disputing for the son’s custody.

After the falling apart of their marriage and his son’s custody being given to Amala, the past events keep echoing in his mind. His dissolved marriage shadows the entire novel. Jayojit’s parents too, are anxious and his mother keeps worrying about her grandson as she views him as someone without parents:

“Someone was not present, and.... Jayojit’s ex-wife; Bonny’s mother-was more and more real in her separation, everyday existence....

She gazes at Bonny with the intensity of one who hadn’t seen him enough.”

(Chaudhuri 42)

But in fact, the divorce is what shows the beginning of a new world. Jayojit’s mind imagines the traditional Indian marriage as the ideal one, which is, for procreation rather than recreation. Even his son, “instead of bringing them together, actually enabled them to separate into their own spheres of desire, and loneliness.” (Chaudhuri 57) His understanding of marriage is brought forth from episodes of his parents’ everyday life- who despite having differences, still co-exist: There was a difference between his parents with regards to appliances; his father distrusted them as he would a rival; his mother had no confidence in using them, but nonetheless desired them.

City, Domestic Life, and Everyday Modernity

The landscape of Calcutta also emerges as a setting that adds a modern sensibility to the fiction. Earlier it “felt not so much a sense of *déjà vu* as one of ironic, qualified continuity.” (Chaudhuri 51) Later, the ambience of the city is being rendered with contentment and grace. Calcutta

accepts Jayojit and then gives him the support that his adopted home, U.S. could not provide. The city watches the much-needed bonding of Joy and his son. Chaudhuri sees this as an opportunity and elegantly explains the intricacies of the everyday life in the city: eating, visiting the bank, dealing with neighbours, servants, relatives, and acquaintances. The author conveys the warmth that one gets from their own place—the homeland. Subroto Roy remarks in *The Literary Criterion*:

“The bulk of this book is, however, not about adulthood or America, Indian immigrants and economics, as the author and public should have projected to be. The book has to do with the author speaking as he has done before, sometimes in excruciatingly, tedious detail, about his own life as he has lived it in Calcutta’s upper middle-class Sunny Park Apartments, halfway between the traditional Bengali area of Gariahat market and the Muslim/ Anglo Indian area of Park Circus and Park Street.” (Roy 112)

Also, Jayojit experienced a slight feeling of dislocation when he realized that although they had left Calcutta at half past seven, it was still seven thirty in Bangladesh. There he had an encounter with a European woman named Mary who was in Salwar suit and was talking to Bonny. Then Jayojit asked her: “What did you really think of Calcutta?” Jayojit asked. “Was it too much for you?” “I liked it!” she smiled, as if surprised herself. She had light brown eyes and the bridge of her nose had reddened with the sun. “It’s certainly like no other place I’ve been to! Next time I come I’m going to try and learn the language.” (Chaudhuri 198)

Shyamala in her paper, *Old Snapshots in New Album: Realism in Amit Chaudhuri’s A New World* also tells that the author “attempts to map out the nation, its changing cultural, configurations and economic preferences through the story of a globalised Bengali middle-class family of Calcutta.” (Shyamala 152)

Amit Chaudhuri very realistically depicts the usual beauty of individuals going on about their daily lives. His focus is more on the demonstration and idiosyncrasies of the city and its inhabitants. He is of the belief that it is crucial for the writer to express in their writings, the truths of people, values and the region. He talks about the routine commonplace activities and draws out the local colours of the Calcutta city.

Silence, Stillness, and the Aesthetics of Nothingness

Apart from it, Chaudhuri also shows the cons of being in the familiar. Jayojit discovers that the pain of his fractured life increases whenever, and wherever he goes or to whomever he speaks. “Home” becomes hell, and Bonny also does not find anything particularly interesting and “new” in the town. The setting of the story is mostly confined to the family apartment, and the time is limited to the two months of Jayojit’s visit. No significant action takes place. The memories of Amala are also shown faded. The heat is too strong, the streets are crowded, and the workers seem unreliable. The ties that once held him closely to his identity, have frayed and the novel focuses more on Jayojit’s growth in attempting to re-establish a reasonable sense of himself. Bill Brown, in his article, *Living Ghosts in Miniature* forms an opinion about the novel and says:

“But what most distinguish a new world is not it’s negative contours, but its repose. It is a gentle book of tremendous patience and sensibility. Amit Chaudhuri calls this more prosaically “a silence which explains more than action could.” *A New World* repeatedly paints such silence in miniature—thus the two cushion covers and two small brass birds, Jayojit purchases later in the book seem like tiny icons, as if were... A few pages away Jayojit says to his parents: “in the end, what do we Bengalis have expected for a few first-class university degrees—and a good command of English?” After reading *A New World*, we can mull this protest with a wry smile.” (Brown 22)

The summing up of the novel takes place with modernization being the backdrop for the story. It leaves the characters, especially Jayojit pondering over something invisible. When the father-son duo depart, there is no sentiment involved. Jayojit and his parents separate in a very formal fashion. A part of his detachment is also attached with his dilemma as he finds himself in the mid-zone without any respite. For him, both his native country and adopted one possess the same value. There is no hope for him and he returns in the same state. This showcases the dehumanising of the self and loss of identity as residues of the modernist filter.

The readers may not find something particularly “new” in the plot but the coherence of the zone, temporality and individuals bring forth the modern identity of the work. The novel is a new take on maturity and self- guarantee through a beautified lens.

Conclusion

A New World can be seen as a presentation of modernity. It becomes a quiet, yet unsettling condition which is marked by emotional restraint and unresolved longing. Chaudhuri captures the essence of modern existence through Jayojit’s return to Calcutta and his eventual departure. The novel doesn’t end with any dramatic closure; it chooses uncertainty as evident in the real world.

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