

The Rising Infringement of the Western Culture in the Traditional Family in Amit Chaudhuri's *A New World*

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Abstract

This research paper focuses on Amit Chaudhuri's distinction between the eastern, which stands for tradition, and the western, which stands for modernity. Despite being a traditionalist, Chaudhuri views tradition through a postmodernist prism. He skillfully captures the tradition and culture of India in *A New World*. By recording routine domestic chores including cooking, eating, washing, and maintaining the cleanliness of the home. The novel depicts the tale of Jayojit Chatterjee, a divorced father who travels to Calcutta with his little son Vikram to see his elderly parents.

Keywords: Eastern, Western, Tradition, family, culture

The fourth novel by Chaudhuri, *A New World* (2000), tells the tale of Jayojit, the main character, a successful writer, economist, and university professor who is a cosmopolitan from the third world and lives and works in America. After divorcing his Bengali wife Amala, he returns to his native Calcutta from America with his son Vikram alias Bonny and spends the summer there with his parents. Father and son re-establish themselves in the city during their four-month stay in India. Flashbacks of his failed marriage and his parents' futile efforts to set up a second marriage for him with a Bengali divorcee are also built-in.

The story clearly depicts the middle-class lifestyle in Kolkata as well as the summertime heat. "The heat had just begun to become intolerable was the middle of April. Outside, birds cried continuously, sharp, clear, obstinate cries. Shadows of windows and facades had settled everywhere upon parapets and bannisters"(8) Jayojit's mother, requests them to eat. To survive the heat, though, they favour water over food. Since Bonny was raised in the United States and no longer recognises his parents' home country, everything looks strange and out of the ordinary to him. The younger generation in the west is quite independent. Bonny feels shy and says he can take a bath by himself when Jayojit's mother asks to bathe her. Through this minor occurrence, Chaudhuri makes fun of the odd Indian practise of grandparents cajoling their grandchildren. Thus, he contrasts the grandmother's wish, which is an ancient custom, with Bonny's response, which is contemporary, to inform the audience of the existence of other cultural forms.

Even the oriental which represents tradition and occidental which represents modern are captured and differentiated by Chaudhuri. "The pabdaa is very fresh" (14) says Jayojit appreciatively. He is eating with his fingers. On the other hand Bonny says, "The daal's good, he said holding up his spoon (14). Even the eyes of the pabdaa fish is a strange and new thing to Bonny and has been observed by him. When Jayojit says "Dadu likes fish-head" (15). Bonny wants to see the eyes of the

fishes. He asks: Can I have a look at it? “Certainly” said his grandfather. Have a good look at it. So the boy stood up and peered at his grandfather’s plate at the long pabdaabone, the fish-head with its eyes lying on the spoon (15).

Jayojit feels strange and out of place because he spent many years away from Kolkata before coming back to spend his holidays. Jayojit strongly dislikes being exposed to noise from outside. The sound of the television and the voices of the characters irritate him more than the heat in the city. He prefers to be alone in a cool place. He is dragged back into the outside world, where he remembers Amala, by his accustomed neighbours, old friends, and necessary shopping. Any writer who is of Indian or NRI descent would frequently contrast the circumstances in India with those in developed countries. Also not an exception to this norm is Chaudhuri. The heat, the dust, and even Indians’ preferences are criticised by Chaudhuri. As a result, he adds, Jayojit’s mother’s lunch prompt him to contrast the diet he has followed after his divorce:

Ever since he had become single again he had begun to eat what he could in America, indiscriminately plundering the shelves in the supermarket for frozen food and pizzas. He had first read about TV dinners in Mad magazine when he was growing up: what glamour pizzas had then! These days in America, he looked at food, as he did many other things, emotionally, as something that could be put to use and cooked quickly. (23)

In Bengal, it is the tradition that the 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 addresses him, ‘baba’ but calls Bonny, as ‘dadu’. This age-old tradition of Bengal culture is aptly brought out in the novel by Chaudhuri as

This made him remember that his father had never called him “baba” as many Bengali fathers do their sons - the age-old loving, inexplicable practice of fathers calling their sons “father”. But on the other hand, Jayojit had remarked silently that he sometimes called Bonny “dadu” (25).

As describing Jayojit’s relationship with Amala, Chaudhuri uses stream-of-consciousness and flashback techniques. For example, when Jayojit crosses the street where Amala’s father lives, he remembers his marriage to Amala. In this line, Chaudhuri displays his sense of humour while describing the Brahmin wedding rites. In a similar spirit, the author feels sorry for the young Indian population that is unable to comprehend the moral principles contained in Indian tradition. However, Jayojit makes a scene while in the throng and smoke rises from the “Agni” (fire) because he is an NRI.

Passing the Chief Justice’s bungalow had reminded Jayojit of Amala’s father, it was both surprising and fortunate that they hadn’t run into each other since the divorce. They’d had many common friends, moved in the same circles. Indeed, both his father and Amala’s were on first-name terms with the Chief Justice as if they were two proud Brahmins enacting but tolerantly disowning the rigmarole of Hindu ceremony. Jayojit had attended the wedding like a tourist he was one of the those who had no time for tradition, but liked, even in a sentimental way, colour and noise, so he’d reacted to the smoke and fuss of ritual with the imitation of a visitor in a traffic-jam, but had said, with genuine delight. “Absolutely wonderful: Bismillah Khan!” when he’d heard the sound of the shehnai... (153).

Jayojit goes back to Claremont with his son after spending the vacation with his parents in Kolkata. His parents come to the airport to send off their son and grandson. There are no much sentiments in their departure as that was in their arrival. Both the son and the parents are quite formal in departing from each other. Bonny also leaves his grandparents showering only little sentiments. Jayojit is highly impersonal who gives less importance to worldly affairs namely love, sentiments and hatred. During the travel he “unzipped his bag and took out the Asian Age” (191). Then he turns the pages of the book without any interest to read them. Then gaining the interest he reads an article on the decline of Congress Party in India. After reading the article he decides to give the editorial another chance to rewrite the story:

Although the paper lay open on his lap, he stared blindly at the cartoon of a rotund politician, and turning a few pages, couldn’t concentrate on what the editorial said

about the decline of the Congress party. When the child became quiet after ten minutes, he looked at the cartoon with new eyes, made the sound of a laugh, and then decided to give the editorial a second chance. (192)

A New World is a newfound maturity and self-assurance in how it approaches life, language, and literariness. To highlight the fact that in the postmodern world people forget the traditional values and give importance to material advancement and as a result view everything, even the marriage bond, as volatile and fragmented, Chaudhuri, as in other novels, creates a concoction of traditional familial values and the attitudes of modern families in this novel.

Work Cited

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