

**Tradition vs. Modernity: A Study of Amit Chaudhuri's *A New World***

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**Abstract**

Regional novel is a work of fiction which deals with certain physical characteristics, such as people, life, customs, habits, manners, tradition, and language of a particular region. Regionalism does not signify the factual reporting or photographic reproduction. The regional artists focus on the features of a selected locality or region, there writers portray the typical habits of particular areas. The idea of local colour has been literally well articulated in the fiction of Jack London, William Faulkner, Thomas Hardy, Harriet Beecher Stowe, etc. As Hardy, the great Victorian novelist, keeps the spirit of Wessex alive before our mind in his novels, Narayan's *Malgudi*, and William Faulkner's *Yoknapatawpha*, capture the inimitable life of their region. In the same way Amit Chaudhuri has achieved greatness by writing about his region, Calcutta in his own way. Calcutta, is the literary home of Indian writing and Chaudhuri as a novelist, essayist and musician finds a sense of amity and portrays the real picture of his region. In the world of Indian fiction in English, Calcutta is the familiar pasture and is aptly called the cultural capital of India. Calcutta provides the setting for almost all of Chaudhuri's novels. In most of his novels, the region Calcutta is the main thematic content. Chaudhuri writes about Calcutta as a complete insider and shares the way of life and essential mores. The place becomes the backdrop for the customs, beliefs and ethical codes. It expresses the authors' point of view. Thus, the place and people being the core of Calcutta his region presents a vision of India in Miniature. This is very well presented through his novels. The main objective of this paper is an attempt to streak the cultural sensibility about tradition, rituals, family, class and identities in the novel of Amit Chaudhuri.

**Keywords:** Culture, Ethnicity, Sensibility, Indian tradition, Domesticity, Rituals

Culture can be portrayed as the behavior and beliefs, distinctive of an individual social age group whereas sensibility is defined as the conscious ideology of one's moral, emotions, existence, sensations, aesthetic notions and standards. So, cultural identity and sensibility suggest awareness towards one's culture, still it is able to comprehend the other cultures and variations that exist between them. The ability to acknowledge our own selves and others is a stepping stone in realizing cultural sensibility. Cultural identity is based on a group that is normally based on similar traits, such as a common language, common heritage, and cultural similarities within the group. Other variables that play key roles in cultural identity are the geographical connection to a particular place, common foods and diets, and perhaps, a common faith. Culture is an essential

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part of human life which exercises a great influence on the personality of individuals to give a proper shape to it. It has been stimulating the native and non-native writers to evocate their writings with its different theories and existence. Culture is viewed as powerful drive on life and death and sometimes, it triumphs over death. Indo-English novels have represented a glimpse of colorful and graceful shades of customs of our country. Literature coming from bilingual culture demonstrates how the tensions existing in different cultures, languages and systems can be utilized for narrative purpose.

Amit Chaudhuri is a multi-talented writer of contemporary Indian writings in English. He is a literary critic, essayist, novelist, poet and also a great singer. He is celebrated as an important star of contemporary Indian writers in English. His writings are discernible and observable which strike and vibrate the heart and mind of the readers. He has given a noted importance for the Indian values in his writings. His works reflect the Indian values coated in Bengali sensibility. Chaudhuri works rebound the Bengali culture, ethnicity and regional sensibility of Calcutta. Amit Chaudhuri has also explored the vitality of Indian culture through his novels and embellished the tradition of Indian English novels with his creative innovations. Chaudhuri's novels provide a new perspective on the theoretical models of the Indian domesticity. The domestic settings of his novels illustrate the material history of the Indian home, associated with religious, social and cultural practices besides he also exhibits how these are adopted and reworked by the protagonists. His artistic perception and innovative vision assist him to change the conventional concepts of Indian English fiction. The region is a mere setting or background of his works. It plays an important role in the development of the story and characterization.

Amit Chaudhuri has a special gift of observing the details in ordinary situation and to transport them into his works. The representation of the minute details of daily life reveals that he is working within the context bound by an established tradition. Chaudhuri's originality in the way of presenting daily life with minute details is entirely different. Amit Chaudhuri's works are set in Calcutta. Sheobhushan Shukla and Anu Shukla, in their article "The Novels of Amit Chaudhuri" write:

One of the things for which they can be profoundly enjoyed is the rendering of the physicality of space in his novels. Calcutta happens to be a more intimate space for him than Bombay, Oxford and Claremont. Wherever Chaudhuri might be in the world and for whatever period, Calcutta is ever present before his mind's eye. In fact, Calcutta is the protagonist of all his novels. (9)

Chaudhuri is a master in portraying the world of miniature, the almost motionless, the unadventurous life, the absence of vulgar posturing, and attention-seeking. His writing is not about ideas of colonial or postcolonial India, but about discrete areas, about parts rather than the assumed whole. Ideologies have no place in his concept of sensibility. His writings seem to be produced by someone for whom the life of the imagination is a substitute for feeling at home and being rooted in a community. He uses a new form and technique which is different from other writers.

Chaudhuri has an unusual liking for Bengali middle class, so it is useless to judge him for restricting himself to certain local spaces in Calcutta and dwelling on the unique characteristic of their local culture. He is actually forming micro worlds. He talks of India, Bengal and Calcutta in the parallel breath as if they are the same. Similarly, he is hesitant to any Indian culture, he talks of the culture of Calcutta and by implication suggests the culture of Bengal and India. He himself confesses, "I grew up with Bengali and Bombay culture, which was a mishmash of western culture and the local culture" (Galvan, 220). Chaudhuri believes in the essence of realism and portrays his locality or regions, Garland also believed in the same concept and has written, in his essay, "The

Question of Success”, “Write of those things of which you know most, and for which you care most. By so doing you will be true to yourself, true to your locality, and true to your time” (35).

Amit Chaudhuri wrote about Northern India, writes novels about Calcutta and Bombay, the places where he was born and brought up. He feels that a writer should pay attention and write about contemporary life. His works, developed from the observation of people and communities, are most by autobiographical in the nature as they woven around his life, his family, servants, and those he and his family know. They are based on details, attention to places, buildings, rooms, manners, dress, language and behavior, in contrast to the ideas of what Indian life is like. They embed the ordinary lives in actual places, sights, sounds, colors, food, and customs, produce a rich density of social notion of a community.

Chaudhuri’s novels acclaim the celebration of local cultures and Individuality. He is an exclusive writer and his writing rests largely on the fact that most sensitive invocation of locality it exhibits in the episodic form and holistic narrative. The factors Locality and Commonplace have been developed as similar preconditions in his novels. This paper is an attempt to trace the elements of cultural identity and sensitivity of life in Chaudhuri’s novels.

Bengali ethos and Indian values are primary concern in the writings of Amit Chaudhuri who has a great concern for Indian values and Bengali sensibility. He initiated his literary career with poems and wrote five novels. He seems to have maintained in his writing’s Indian values, Bengali culture and tradition. Amit Chaudhuri’s works explores an influence of a particular space on the characters and events of his novels. He describes the hills, the forests, the roads, buildings, the architecture, the towns and the countryside of his region and gives maximum exposure to them. It has been used as a background of his works.

Amit Chaudhuri belongs to the category of writers and depicts Bengali Culture and its people in his novels. Amit Chaudhuri represents both a synthesis of a tension between his Bengali culture and postmodern sensibility. His writings serve as a wonderful key to understanding the vitality and specificity of Indian modernity and of modern transformation of Indian civilization. His works reflect the Indian values coated in Bengali sensibility. Chaudhuri gives importance to such spaces which have been marginalized. These spaces are ignored by others. Chaudhuri’s fiction is made up of these spaces. Hilary Mantel observed, in *The New York Reviewed Books*, that it is difficult to categorize Chaudhuri. He writes seriously about unserious events. He does not illuminate tragic aspects of life. He observes random and unimportant details and colors them with wonder. There is a childlike curiosity in his approach to life. Amit Chaudhuri is a miniaturist who has perfected the art of the moment. He follows Proust in radiating tiny moments.

Chaudhuri’s fourth novel, *A New World*, won Sahitya Akademi Award in 2003. This story is however, not just about Jayojit, but about the marriage of his parents, and about the Bengali life in hot, busy Calcutta as well as Chaudhuri build his sets within the four walls of a small flat a contrasting image of marriage, a failed modern-day marriage, and an apparently successful, if extremely traditional marriage which prescribes the roles enquired and accepted by both the husband and wife. Chaudhuri writes with great ease about Calcutta, his city of birth. His description of daily life is vivid and his treatment of the story is filled with a subtle tenderness. This novel also traces the existence of diasporic consciousness through the frame of cultural sensibility.

Amit Chaudhuri illustrates a world which is modern in all senses of the word. The boundaries have expanded to include all the continents and people have begun to migrate in search of opportunities and fortunes. Indians turned to the West to the U.S.A. for jobs, to study abroad, to get employed, and even get married; sometimes with and sometimes without the knowledge of

their parents. But, the marriages do not last long and the families get broken. The children live with either their fathers or mothers by turns. Everyone feels lonely and alienated. In contrast to the world created in his two earlier novels where the family is anchored deep with its members tethered by bonds of love, here, in this novel the security and assurance of care are absent. Things are falling apart and everyone is drifting.

In *A New World*, Amit Chaudhuri, presents a miniaturist concept called “family” and subtly deals with it and sharply juxtaposes the two generations in the institution of family. The older couple, the admiral and his wife, represent loyalty to the institution of family. On the other hand, the younger couple, the admiral’s younger son Jayojit and his wife Amala get divorce after eleven years of their marriage. After a year of divorce and courts, Jayojit, a semi-successful writer and economist, finally retrieves his son Bonny for his summer holidays. They leave their home in the American Midwest and go back to Calcutta, Bonny’s grandparents, the Admiral and his wife in Calcutta. The central character Jayojit Chatterjee with his young son Vikram, comes to Calcutta from the United States to visit his parents for two months in the sweltering pre-monsoon season.

*A New World* deals with the life of an America based Indian professor, Jayojit who visits Calcutta with his son, Bonny after his divorce. Jayojit is married to a Bengali woman, Amala, but the marriage falls apart and Amala is awarded the custody of the child. He challenges the custody under the Indian laws as the country adopted i.e. United States is not able to help him in this regard. So, he returns to Calcutta to his parents and his region Calcutta accepts him and gives him a sort of support which the U.S, his adopted country fails to help him. A new world, as the place is new to both the father and the son, watches Jayojit and his son when they share beautiful moments with each other. In Calcutta, Jayojit lives with his parents. Chaudhuri explain with elegance the details of married life of an elderly couple entrenched in the unquestioning roles of their past and of a modern marriage. This novel focus attention on the small events of everyday life: eating, going to the bank, dealing with the neighbours, servants, acquaintances and relatives in his region, Calcutta. Through his sensitive descriptions of the daily trivialities of life, Chaudhuri manages to convey the wonderful, almost magical, quality that one sees only in the place which one loves.

Chaudhuri is a realist and he has depicted the small, ordinary details of everyday life of an individual. He focuses is in presenting the peculiarities of Calcutta and its inhabitants. He believes it to be important for the writer to express realistically in their writings about people, culture and the land of their region. He tries to bring out the essence of his region, Calcutta using different aspects. He talks about the routine and commonplace activities so as to bring out the local colour of his region, Calcutta.

The father-and-son sojourn back to the city in which Jayojit grew up can be seen as a hiatus of recovery and reflection for Jayojit before he resumes his busy life in the United States. The divorce is stressful, but Jayojit and his ex-wife are able to reach a reasonable agreement concerning the joint custody of their son. The narrative is confined to Calcutta and to Jayojit’s flashback to the American Midwest, where he teaches and which his return to the place in due course. Jayojit and Bonny have to adapt themselves to these changed climatic conditions, since they experience the severe heat of a few months in a particular period of time in any year.

*A New World* offers a depiction of the emotional intricacies of marriage and its disappointment. It is about Jayojit Chatterjee who lives in America and visits his elderly parents in Calcutta. He feels relocated and unsettled. His Bengali wife, Amala, puts her husband through a revolting divorce after falling in love with her gynecologist. She also gains the custody of their young son, Vikram or Bonny. Jayojit is allowed to have Bonny with him only during the boy’s school vacations. Jayojit feels indebted to take Bonny to Calcutta to help him to meet with his grandfather

Admiral Chatterjee and his grandmother Ruby. Through Chaudhuri's precise and reminiscent writing, the reader experiences Jayojit's inner life and his past, particularly, his struggles in recalling the memories of India and America.

Jayojit though returns to his home land, he refuses to immerse himself in his native city's more corporeal pleasures, and he is too careful about the change in his food habits. He keeps himself brand-name clean by going into a chemist to order his Colgate toothpaste and his Dove soap and his Ponds talc. The closest he gets to real interaction with Calcutta, the little trips he makes to the bank where he quietly imagines flirtations with the tellers. Otherwise, the city's teeming voices are like the sound of televisions from neighboring flats - a 'form of public dreaming'.

Jayojit had been much influenced by his teachers at school and his father during his formative years. When Jayojit's parents were at Cochin, he used to come to spend his vacation, settle himself in air conditioner room as it was sweltering in Cochin. Jayojit almost topped the list at Stephen's and had been selected to scholarship interview. Finally, he found himself in America, with some of his friends, particularly, one an assistant editor of a national daily Rajen Mehra, a lecturer of the JNU.

Jayojit is one of the fifteen million "Non-Resident Indians," whom the waiters in his father's club regard as 'once people might have regarded holy men or charlatans'. As the part of the Indian Diaspora, Jayojit participates in 'a new world' which takes on many faces. Although a Brahmin by inheritance, Jayojit knows no Sanskrit but has read the Upanishad in English translation. He finds the simple act of negotiating a taxi ride in Calcutta difficult, for "he'd lost the knack of talking to these people, and it often made him rude. "While Jayojit has lost touch with his own people and culture to such a degree that it is now hard to retrieve; for his American - born son, Indian culture interred incognita. Vikram, strangely nick named Bonny, spends his play time with Jurassic Park toy dinosaurs, but has no idea who the popular Hindu god Hanuman is when he sees a picture of the monkey god pasted on the windshield of taxi.

If Jayojit no longer feels at home, in India, he is also estranged from his adoptive America. When he thinks of his life there, what comes to his mind is wandering the aisles of a chill supermarket hoping to bump into an acquaintance. The ties that once bound him to an identity are broken or frayed and the novel charts his minute progress in trying to re-establish a workable sense of himself. Jayojit's mother does not know the secret of leading a life in that continent, of driving down the motor way, going to the supermarket, filling up a trolley with things, his orphan hood and distance.

*A New World* shows how perceptions differ, especially between people of different generations. For example, the Admiral is opposed to buying a washing machine but Jayojit is very much eager to purchase it, the Admiral is just against that thought. It's all to lessen the burden to his mother. Traditional and modern thoughts are juxtaposed in a very subtle conversation. Jayojit reads an editorial in a damp newspaper, about the country's requirement of the implementation of "Economic Liberalization". This concept and its necessity to the context of India is supported by some, at the sometime criticized by others. To some

Economic Liberalization was urgently required, but how, too, if introduced without caution, it might lead not only to the loss of what was seen to be Indian culture, but to uncontrollable economic disparity. Jayojit and Bonny go down the flat as a part of observing the apartment and its surroundings. Instead of taking a lift, they go down the stairs as Bonny likes it most. The stairs end opening into a hall, where there is a row of wooden post-boxes with numbers painted on them. "It's amazing the time at which these men come', Jayojit had thought as he'd

watched, three days ago, a man arrived with a bag of letters at four O' clock, 'But if you tell them anything, they won't give your mail tomorrow'" (111).

Chadhuri is at his best in describing the small scenes of daily life. Motherly affection urges Jayojit's mother to bathe Vikram. On another occasion, when Jayojit and his mother decide to buy a washing machine. The Admiral opposes it insisting that it is cheaper to hire a servant to wash the clothes. It is an excellent snap shot of middle-class urban India poised between modernity and tradition. The novel holds the understated and restrained style he has established. He concentrates instead on the ordinary, the unsensational, and the mundane, virtually without action. This novel offers a micro focus which covers a small stretch of time in the life of the protagonist. Looking at the title of the novel, one may wonder whether the novelist has any desire to do something like Bacon's *New Atlantis*, Huxley's *Brave New world* or even Thomas Moor's *Utopia* Chaudhuri problematizes the title and throws in a sense of ambiguity about the newness of the world. The novel is abounding with characters that are traditional in nature. Admiral Chatterjee, Jayojit, his mother his son, etc. are embodiment of middle-class interests. Jayojit's arrival, at the outset, brings to our mind a vivid picture of Indian middle-class living. Jayojit comes home from America in a taxi. The taxi with its rusty windows and harsh noise takes the reader to a middle-class backdrop. He who had been leading a luxuries life in America, accepts the taxi. Vikram, Jayojit's son, also feels taxi as the most natural place to be in he was unaffected by its rusty windows and the harsh noise of the very old taxi. The author's keen and subtle observation and detailed description of the flats, the trees, both flowering and shade ones that surrounded the apartment, the congenial atmosphere to play, the care taken by the gardener, the cute curious looks of the watchman, the interest of the dwellers of the flat in bringing up the pet animals, all are figuratively described.

Various diasporas have changed and continue to change the world in various ways. The new worlds emerging from such phenomena go beyond the personal, for the country they had left behind is changed as well as the one to which they go. This is how Amit Chaudhuri in this novel, has been successful in making a vivid description of the ordinary aspects of life. Chaudhuri's writings don't find real plots or particular stories to tell his readers, in spite the describing the day-to-day living and experiences in a beautiful way. One can find minute details of a house or a typical day. They have the glimpse of their characters' everyday mundane life that is disguised behind beautiful prose. For the author, the protagonist is only an element in a story whereas evening, room, wall, smoke, care, are other possible ones.

Amit Chaudhuri is essentially an artist in the true sense of the word. Writers use various narrative techniques/devices to formulate powerful stories, just as an artist makes use of special paints and brushes to make visual images. Narrative strategies serve many purposes, including supporting in character development, building up plot and conveying the story is world to existence for readers. Narrative techniques present a deeper sense for the reader and facilitate the reader to employ imagination to visualize the situations. There are various techniques employed by the novelist to explain, explore and objectify their themes or ideology. It includes First-person narration, Second-person narration, Third-person narration, Flashback, Foreshadowing, Back story, Frame story, stream of consciousness, Magical realism, etc. Use of literary technique is an important weapon for the writers to write their work of art successfully. The writer using the right technique is able to convey his ideas to his readers. It produces some impact in the novel. It acts as a mediator through which the writer can interpret and transform the reality. Amit Chaudhuri, in his novels, depicts the Bengali culture and its people. His novel throws light on themes like relationship, culture, music, food, etc. His own region Calcutta plays an important role in the development of the narrative and characterization. Chaudhuri's characterization is truthful

presentation of the middle class in the Indian society. Almost all the characters belong to this class and his novels, chiefly deal with their hopes and frustrations. Chaudhuri presents his characters with a combination of detached and good-humored acceptance of life in which evil exists along with good.

Chaudhuri has the unusual gift of turning every little mundane details of daily life into poetic beauty. His novels also are abounding in pictorial quality. He paints places and characters in his novels with his beautiful vibrant and complex fabric of language. He is an expert in creating images. He describes sounds and their pattern. He has an acute ear for sound effects probably due to his training and accomplishments as a musician. He depicts the ordinary, mundane, daily activities of people, especially, the middle-class people / families. His writings deal with the issues neither related to the destiny of nations nor with the matters of heart and caste. Culture contrast is never far removed from Chaudhuri's fiction. This unique style distinguishes Chaudhuri from a great many other Indian English novelist. His writings firmly place him in the frontline of contemporary Indian writing in English.

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