

A NEW WORLD: A CRITIQUE

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Amit Chaudhuri, an Anglo Indian writer, writes about the ordinary, mundane realities of our lives in a sublime way that succeeds in gripping the interest of the readers. He writes about the lives of people with common problems, specially the middle class and through his controlled writing and lyrical prose, he makes his novels a beautiful piece of work that successfully captures the interest of the readers.

A *New World*, the fourth novel by Chaudhuri, begins with the protagonist Jayojit's return to India in the month of April, after his divorce from his wife Amala. Jayojit, an NRI, is an associate professor of economics in America. After his divorce, he comes back to Kolkata with his son Bonny, during their vacations, to visit his parents. After being denied the custody of his son Bonny by an American court, Jayojit decides to settle the dispute through the Indian courts as his father Admiral Chatterjee had advised him. Jayojit comes to Kolkata not out of any overwhelming love for his homeland but to seek some comfort from his post divorce tensions in the company of his parents. The novelist does not deal with anything extraordinary in the novel, rather, he deals with the mundane, monotonous life of Jayojit after his divorce. So, here, he deals with a family and its everyday life with its common problems as he himself puts it in "Aalap", "in *A New World*, I wanted to deal with a family and their everyday life and the ordinary when the ordinary is no more redemptive" (176).

The title of the novel is quite interesting and various critics have dealt with it differently. The world of Jayojit and his family has somewhat changed. Mr. Chatterjee,

after his retirement has some difficulty adjusting to retirement and moving in a world where his rank no longer impresses or is of much use. Mrs. Chatterjee, now grown old still takes care of the household adapting herself to changed circumstances. Jayojit's world has changed due to his divorce from his wife Amala and now he will have to face the ups and downs of his life all alone. This has also affected the life of his son Bonny who has lost the magic of his childhood. So the title is completely justified as the world of almost all the characters has changed. Even the city Calcutta, now Kolkata has also changed to global, cosmopolitan city. The protagonist, Jayojit, an NRI discovers an altogether new India. It is probably on this score that the novelist entitles his novel as 'A New World'.

Indians have a remarkable quality of their concern towards relationships. Chaudhuri beautifully describes India, its people and how they are related to each other. The novel, *A New World*, also deals with relationships. The novelist is capable of rendering Indian life, its people, and their feelings and sentiments towards their relationships with so much perfection only because of his deep rooted Indianness. Basically it is a family saga. Jayojit's parents are concerned about his remarriage. Jayojit becomes more conscious about his son Bonny after realising that he has become a single parent. Though not much emotion rises to the surface but Jayojit does mull over what went wrong with his marriage. He fails to understand why Amala chose to go her own way when they had grown up with the same background. The effect of Jayojit's failed marriage was depressing for his parents as is evident in the following lines from the

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novel :

For, since the divorce, the Admiral and his wife had withdrawn into themselves and gone into a sort of mourning; their flat had become a shell, and the neighbours' flat, in their imagination, had moved further away. (44)

The novelist undoubtedly has a special gift to draw the relationships within the family with great precision and delicacy. The beauty of relationship of Mr. Chatterjee and his wife Mrs. Chatterjee is finely caught in the following description where the novelist describes Mr. Chatterjee as an old fashioned husband:

He was old fashioned; he rarely praised his wife's cooking, but kept his ears pricked, like a child's for others' praises. More and more his wife had become to him like a mother and a nurse, giving him his medicine with a glass of water, serving his food, to which he submitted with a helpless, sour-faced, child-like decorum, and overlooking, with good humour, his constant need to exercise his inconsequential tyrannical hold over this household, in which usually only he and his wife lived.(14-15)

The novelist has meticulously structured the novel through the play of analogies and contrasts. The novelist beautifully delineates with delicacy the details of married lives, the lives of an elderly couple entrenched in the unquestioning roles of their past and of a modern marriage now sharply severed in two. To put it in other words, marriage intact and secure has been a luxury of unproblematic old world whereas, divorce is the reality of Chaudhuri's challenging new world. Then there is a clear contrast between Bonny's modern mother with Mrs. Chatterjee,

traditional and committed mother of Jayojit. The novelist seems to have an unusual gift of turning every little mundane detail of everyday life into poetic beauty through the sheer allure of his language. Also, he never fails to make his characters alive. The characters that do not even appear on the scene, like Jayojit's ex-wife and his brother are well rendered.

We Indians are fond of drawing similarity between the faces of children with their parents. As the novelist is also deep rooted in Indianness, so let us see how he draws a similarity between the faces of Jayojit and his father Mr. Chatterjee in the following passage:

His face bore a remarkable similarity to his father's, the same lines around the mouth, the nose curving gently, the same fair complexion, both faces marked by education, a privileged background, and it was clear some sort of achievement. The father's was a brahmin's face, rather old-fashioned in a way; in another setting, another time, it would have had a worldly but ceremonial aura; it had an inherited severity. The grey hair on his beard had a frosty stillness. In both faces, specially on the father's, there was a trace of dissatisfaction and naivety, suggesting that neither man could make friends easily.(62)

Chaudhuri's novels are primarily descriptions of places and people. Almost nothing happens in terms of either events or changes in character. He creates magic through beautiful fabric of his language. He draws images and pictures from his wide experience and observations. About images, he himself puts it in "Aalap", "I'm very much interested in images and I see the world that I'm writing about through images. An image

is a necessary impetus for me to write. It is a visual thing for me". In his works all the five kinds of imagery could be found though visual and sound images are more frequent. Let us consider an example of description of rain in the following lines:

Come the rains, they'd vanish as if they'd muttered a mantra that made them dissolve into the atmosphere. The monsoons, like some messenger hurrying through the land, throwing his moth-like shadow, would have come to the South before he made his journey, so that he'd already have seen the large drops on his way to Bangalore, from where he set out for Delhi.(139)

Further, the novelist registers all kinds of sound patterns that he comes across in his daily life. He feels that these sound patterns have a rhythm that imparts aesthetic sense and pleasure to his ears. The author also has lot of inclination towards music. He does not talk about some great music or Beethoven's music, rather it is the music that is produced in our daily activities. Even the minutest sounds cannot escape his ears and gets mentioned in his writings. He mentions the sound of television, air conditioner, birds, etc. that are part of our daily life. To cite an example, let us see how the following passage abounds in sound effects:

Behind the sound of the cutlery – the Admiral habitually made a lot of noise, like one busily dispatching a meal in a railway canteen – the shehnai could be heard, high-pitched, almost intrusive: and then a watchman's voice on a loudspeaker announcing the numbers of cars, speaking an urgent Hindustani version of English letters and numbers, became audible.⁽⁷⁴⁾

Apart from imagery, irony, another literary trope is also deployed by the writer to produce the effect of defamiliarisation in his novels. The author is sometimes amused at and sometimes critical of what he sees around himself and uses irony to project his feelings. Though the author is never harsh at what he writes but he does register his protest over certain issues. Jayojit is quite critical of people who keep pets in their small flats when there is hardly any space for human beings. So, he “wondered why people who live in flats hardly big enough for a medium-sized family should keep dogs”(37). The author is quite sarcastic about those parents who accept that “offspring who live abroad will appear to them in a slightly altered incarnation, and are even disappointed if they do not”(22).

The novelist also possesses a special faculty for the world of children and portrays it beautifully in his novels. Children usually have an unusual perspective and perceive things according to their own whims and fancies. Even the ordinary, commonplace things become interesting and strange for them. To cite an example, let us see how Jayojit thinks about the refrigerator and the things kept inside it:

In the half-open fridge, into which he once more put the ice tray, shone the small light; he closed the door; when he was a boy, returning home for the summer, he'd wonder, as if it were a matter of more importance than his studies, whether the light stayed on even after the door was closed, and if so, what the fridge's sealed but lit world was like in the inside. (169)

Chaudhuri's writings are not confined to one particular place, region or country. He often mentions foreign land, its people or culture in his novels. In fact his imagination knows no bounds. It can reach anywhere to

bring in analogies and images that present the effect of defamiliarisation in his works. Now, in the novel, we find that there are nicely realised details from the observations about Biman Bangladesh airlines and its passengers to the Biman office of Rome or Vienna. It is really interesting to see how Jayojit speculates that the Biman office was Rome or Vienna.

The Biman office was crowded; the queues disintegrated in a mixture of high spirits and panic. Jayojit stood facing a poster with an elegant woman sitting by a fountain. This would be Rome or Vienna. The glass door opened whenever someone came in and the pavement outside became visible, and the noise of the traffic on Chowringhee amplified until the door closed again.(164)

Moreover, the protagonist lives in America with his wife so, the places in America are also frequently mentioned in the novel. As we move further, we see that there is also a reference of Russia, break-up of the Soviet Union and reconciliation of liberalisation with Marxist beliefs in China. This is how as readers we witness that the writings of the novelist cross the boundaries of the nations and thus have the element of cosmopolitanism.

Chaudhuri is quite conscious of his language and surely has some command over it. He meticulously crafts his sentences that clearly show his love for language. He uses a beautiful, complex and vibrant fabric of language in rendering his characters and their lives. Though nothing major happens in the novel yet one is kept captivated simply by the sheer allure of the language. It is clear that he is equally conscious about the accent and the pronunciation as he points out in a sentence from the novel, “ ‘Baba, I’m not hungry! ‘there was a faint American broadening in the child’s vowels’”(8). Chaudhuri himself gives

an important clue to his use of English. In his book, *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*, he writes:

One of the subtlest ways, indeed, in which the multilingual imagination enters an Indian text has to do with the use of English words – not transmuted or “appropriated and subverted for the post-colonial’s own ends”, as the current dogma has it, but estrangingly, in their ordinary and standard forms...(28).

Since the author is a Bengali and has an inclination for his native language, so he frequently incorporates Bengali words and phrases in his works. The author himself says that Bangla was a graphic experience for him. He translates things when he finds words in English that are aesthetically pleasing to him. Aesthetics and emotions are significant to him. The novelist further says that our writing in Bengali or English and our writing novels are not the result of coloniality as is clear from the following lines:

It is the condition of modernity, of industrialisation, coming to India, and the middle class being formed. From that comes a certain kind of sensibility that expresses itself in the novel, whether through English or Bengali. (On Belonging 48)

So far we have already seen that nothing spectacular happens in the novel unless small happenings and events are called spectacular. The novelist does not have a grand plot or a story to tell in his novels, rather, he describes daily happenings and experiences of our lives such as getting up in the morning, reading newspaper, having meals, visiting relations and so on. It thus becomes evident that the writer considers the poetry of the commonplace to be more important and it is reflected in his writings. In

the novel, the novelist had successfully tried to cultivate the tunes and tones of the Indian as well as the Western tradition. Thus the novelist aestheticizes his language by deploying all sorts of literary tropes and devices that ultimately renews our perceptions of the ordinary, commonplace things. The novel, *A New World*, like his previous three novels, is thus a successful piece of literary work and has been acclaimed worldwide. It is aptly quoted in the blurb of the novel, "...Here is a wonderful book in plain English, which deserves to be enthusiastically accepted."

References

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