

## Different Shades of Relationship in Amitchaudhuri's *A New World*

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Amit Chaudhuri is ranked in the category of great novelist of 21<sup>st</sup> century. As a versatile genius he always maintains unity between manner and matter. He always chooses subjects from the daily life of Indians and he is at his best in describing the small scenes of daily life. He draws a very vivid picture of relationship in his *A New World*. He writes of a more ambivalent Calcutta, a city no more than a minor place of transit: in fact the focus is not the city but a small family with a divorced person Jiyojit visiting from America. Not everyone can capture the slice of Calcutta so well.

*A New World* easily catches the attention of its readers and it is the specialty of Chaudhuri's narration that the reader cannot stop before to finish the book. The story has emotional moves, focusing on shades of relationships in human life. A year after his divorce Jiyojit Chatterjee, a professor of Economics in the US, is on a visit to Kolkata to meet his father, a retired Admiral, and his mother. Jiyojit has been divorced for an year—his wife has the custody of their seven year old son, Bonny—and is suspended in the present where his world is contained by his son, his father and mother, and a Kolkata that he is too cynical to explore or appreciate. Told with an uncanny tenderness, the story traces Jiyojit's tryst with a truth he can't put behind easily. His sense of dislocation echoes his deepest uncertainties and fragile assumptions of a future he isn't yet prepared to think about. And as Jiyojit walks the bustling streets of Calcutta, he

finds himself not only caught between clashing memories of India and America, but also between different versions of his life, revisiting lost opportunity, realized potential, and lingering desire. Chaudhuri's writing, like his characters, is admirable in its restraint, as in this passage in which he describes Jayojit's first morning in Calcutta:

**Jayojit had woken up late, at eleven. He had had a bath, and then changed into a shirt and shorts. Wearing shorts exposed his large fair thighs and calves, covered with smooth strands of black hair. His mother seemed to notice nothing unusual about his clothes; parents accept that offspring who live abroad will appear to them in a slightly altered incarnation, and are even disappointed if they do not.**

Thus formality and forbearance binds this family as much as love and Chaudhuri successfully described the depth of blood relations here.

Like other well-known Indian English writers Chaudhuri follows the techniques to raise the questions about the worst situations of life. As after his divorce Jayojit comes to Calcutta his parents felt broken to see their son like this. Here readers are forced to think that why do our dear one give us so much pain? Why the sacred relation of marriage is broken by the burden of ambitions? The story has a stickiness too, an immediacy of loss, or acceptance, that is central to all our lives, regardless of race, religion, or the part of the world we inhabit—and contrary to what stickiness might conjure—in storytelling, it is one of the difficult aspects to develop, in a way of defining the boundary for the readers to remain content.

The complex interplay of words and punctuation add an unparalleled depth to a story well told. A New World is all about relationships between parents and children. Jayojit's parents

are deftly depicted. Notable for the precision of his observations, Chaudhuri recounts small telling moments of daily life without order that avoids looking squarely at the obvious dysfunction in the Chatterjee household, while at the same time obliquely illuminating the melancholy that pervades it. Once part of colonial India's military, Jayojit's now retired parents live lives of reduced circumstances. Uncomplaining, Jayojit and Bonny endure the climate and ennui, and in a marginal, temporary way participate in a world that is no longer theirs. His father is a retired Admiral of the Indian Navy. After a life of privilege, the old man and his wife now have to fend for themselves and count every penny of their dwindling savings. The retired Admiral has to take the bus to the bank because he can no longer afford a chauffeur for his battered old car. But he is proud, when Jayojit wants to buy a washing machine for his mother, his father objects. His mother is disappointed, but she can't go against her husband. It's a traditional Indian marriage. Jayojit's father doesn't even always speak to his wife through them clearly depend on each other. In the process, we see his interaction with his parents, his parent's relationship and his own relationship with his parents. There are also flashback to his broken marriage and his parents' abortive attempt to arrange a second marriage for him with a Bengali divorcee. He had met her on his previous visit but they had got nowhere. She had backed out; he now leaves from his father, because he had seemed to be looking not so much for a wife as a governess for his son. Chaudhuri is excellent at portraying little boys.

In *A New World*, however, when Dr. Jayojit Chatterjee goes back to Calcutta to spend a summer with his parents, he finds that he feels just as much an outsider there as he does in the American Midwest, where he now lives.



Admittedly, Jayojit has every reason to feel unsettled. After falling in love with her gynecologist, Jayojit's Bengali wife, Amala, put her husband through a nasty divorce, gained custody of their young son, Vikram, or "Bonny," and took him with her to San Diego. Now Jayojit can have Bonny with him only during his school vacation, which begins in April and ends in August. Since his father, Admiral Chatterjee, and his mother Ruby have not seen their grandson for some time—when they cancelled a trip to the United States when they heard about the divorce—Jayojit felt obligated to take Bonny to Calcutta as soon as he could. *A New World* begins with the arrival of Jayojit and Bonny at his parents' apartment and ends with them on the plane from Dhaka to New York.

Although the first few chapters of *A New World* are uneventful, there are hints that the summer will not pass without incident. Any family get-together can produce a quarrel, and Jayojit knows that his parents are troubled about the divorce, which has limited their access to their grandchild, and also about their son's failure to marry again, which would at least give them the hope of other grandchildren. Moreover, as Ruby keeps reminding Jayojit, Bonny may become ill either from too much exposure to the sun or from something he eats, not to mention his being exposed to germs for which his American immune system is unprepared. Jayojit is also well aware that his father might have another stroke, perhaps this time a fatal one.

However, the months pass by without a crisis. Every day is much like another. Bonny plays with his miniature cars and trucks and his Jurassic Park dinosaurs; the admiral checks on his investments and takes his naps; Ruby dusts, cooks, and complains about her shiftless servant; Jayojit observes the neighborhood, thinks about working on a new book, eats his mother's luchis, and gains weight.

Chaudhuri's realistic story is as engrossing as the novels of the Magical Realists dominating Indian fiction on the cusp of the twenty-first century. Not only does he capture the essence of life in upper-class Calcutta society, its nostalgia, and its inherent comedy, but through his protagonist he also reveals what it means to be an exile and, even more fundamentally, what it means to be a human being.

Like many adults shaken by personal crises, Jayojit arrives at his parents' home expecting to recapture the sense of security he knew as a child. However, because his father insisted on spending his retirement years in a place where he had never been based, Calcutta was never Jayojit's home, and therefore it has few associations for him. Moreover, Jayojit himself has had too many new experiences to be able to return to the past. He is indeed a different person from the child he was once was. For example, though his mother takes great pains to cook food he once liked, Jayojit has been so strongly influenced by American notions.

The city appears more as "background". This is an interesting distinction but I would dispute it on the grounds that *A New World* actually foregrounds very little. Emotions, impressions, actions are all so muted in this text that a reader has to strain to hear the characters think. The whole atmosphere of the novel is soaked in the culture of Calcutta and you are left only with a whiff of fish cooked in mustard oil and the orange flash of a gulmohar tree against a monsoon sky.

The poetry of these images is undeniable, but individual beads tend to scatter without a binding thread - narrative security that *A New World* conspicuously does not provide. It isn't that Chaudhuri's characters are unconvincing. Anyone familiar with the *bhadralok* culture of Bengal will recognise Admiral and

MrsChatterji, leading an existence of slow, attenuated retirement in a south Calcutta flat after the sprawling bungalows of government service. They would have come across several clones of Jayojit..Instead, 70 pages into *A New World*, despite the ambience of Calcutta being rendered with felicity and grace, I found myself guiltily flicking pages over in search of “action”. This was followed by a bout of mental pleading: Jayojit, come on, romance that pretty girl at the bank; Bonny, just for once fling your plastic dinosaurs against the verandah grill and indulge in a tantrum.

After all, the very title *A New World* gives numerous glimpses of Calcutta and also signals the twin themes of “discovery” and “alienation”. Jayojit is literally caught in-flight - the novel has a neat structure that begins with his arrival from the airport and closes with his leaving for America - in a space Matthew Arnold once described as “two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born”. Chaudhuri is a gifted writer who clearly has his finger on the pulse of a community that appears best to express its feelings through food - those endless routines of frying up *luchis*.

His narrative skill is intense, choice of words simple yet sharp, making the characters lively. It also has a surprising pace, which makes the book addictive, almost irresistible. Consequently, this book can't be put away unfinished, easily.

### References

1. *Amitchaudhuri: A New World*.