Chapter - III

A NEW WORLD
In his third novel A NEW WORLD Amit Chaudhuri depicts a world which is modern in all senses of the word. The frontiers have expanded to include all continents and people have begun to migrate in search of opportunities and fortunes. Indians especially turned to the West, to the U.S.A. for jobs. They study abroad, get employed there and even get married; sometimes with and sometimes without the knowledge of their parents. But the marriages do not last long and the families are broken. The children live with either fathers or mothers by turns. Every one is 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 the novel A NEW WORLD Amit Chaudhuri, taking a miniaturist concept called “family”, has subtly dealt with it and sharply juxtaposed 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 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, to Bonny’s grand parents, the Admiral and his wife.
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.

He had come back in April, the aftermath of the lawsuit and court proceedings in two countries still fresh, the voices echoing behind him. But he felt robust.

(*P.3)

According to James Gerein, 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.¹

The divorce is stressful, but Jayojit and his ex-wife are able to reach a reasonable agreement concerning the joint custody of their son.

Jayojit's father could not reconcile himself to the fact that the boy had to tag along part of the year with Jayojit, and then go back to his mother, who was living elsewhere on the vast American map, with someone else.

(P.7)

The narrative is confined to Calcutta and to Jayojit's flashback to the American Midwest, where he teaches and to which he returns in due course. As they are the severe hot months of the year, Jayojit and Bonny have to adapt themselves to these changed climatic conditions.
The heat had just begun to become intolerable - it 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.

Joyojit though returns to his home land, he refuses to immerse himself in his native city's more corporeal pleasures, and 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 neighbouring 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 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.

Karan Sing : ' Do you think we'll persist with the parliamentary system ? or adopt the presidential system ?

Jayojit : ' I think our parliamentary system needs to change, sir, but not towards the presidential system. If anything, it needs to be decentralised '.

(P.141)
Finally, he found himself in America, with some of his friends, one an assistant editor of a national daily Rajen Mehra, another 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 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 is terra 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 to the windshield of taxi.

A small cut-out of Hanuman, pasted to the bottom of the windshield, had caught his eye. Hanuman, above the two motionless wipers, was in mid-flight, holding a mountain above him: the Gandhamadan parbat.

'That's Hanuman, the monkey god,'...

(P.188)

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 could not know of his secret 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 ... even imagine it.

(P.24)

The author's ignorance of America extends to the most mundane of matters. Here is some attempted dialogue:

Son, tenured academic from Iowa:
'you know, in the states, no one walks any more. They drive; and once a week, when they want exercise, they go to the gym.'
Puzzled mother in India:
'What if they need need some matches- or milk?'
Son: 'oh, they phone! Home delivery! And then they go for a "work-out" and walk for hours on a treadmill.'

(P.79)

The novel 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.
There was a difference between his parents with regard to appliances; his father distrusted them as he would a rival; ...

‘They don’t seem to have done too badly - so I presume they have some uses’.

‘But we have cheap labour, Joy,’ said Admiral Chatterjee.

‘We’re living in a consumer society, baba; said Jayojit.

(Pp.105, 107)

His father had an old Fiat Car which had been spoilt with all their tinkering. Though he worked for some time as a consultant in a Marwari Company, he gave it up as he had been fed up going to the office daily for just a petty salary. When he was in service, things were fine and colourful, with all his rank in the navy. But, soon after the retirement, “the business of keeping oneself alive has become so expensive” that most of his savings is being drained towards hospitalization costs despite the government’s contribution to it.

-they’d never thought of the value of money before. ... they gave you everything as long as you were working, but in old age you had to manage your life and your Finances yourself.

(P.21)

The Admiral frets and fumes cursing the bank employees for not being dutiful to their service.

Everyone belongs to a trade union, and no one believes in service. ...
he had realized in his post-retirement years in Calcutta that his commanding presence was of no use at post office and banks; ... and resented it. At these places, he had to learn to tone down his voice, to wait patiently like every one else in silence.

(P.29)

Later, in the conversation between father and son, the former accepts his un-awareness of the share market, and that all his savings are confined to government bonds. Further, the idea of seeking advice from Haru Kaku, a cousin of his father, who is a chartered accountant, has been rejected by the Admiral. During the time of the Rajiv Gandhi government, once Jayojit had been appointed as one of the advisors; he suggested “gradual liberalization”, at the beginning of India’s new economic order; with a belief that -

It could change India from a country living on borrowings from the west into a productive and competitive one. (P.30)

But, his father’s hesitation and lack of confidence about investing in shares even today, dismayed him.

Although Jayojit was an economist, he knew more about economic theory than shrewd investment, about global trends and third-world markets, ... beyond the scope of his discipline. (P.29)
The Admiral shares certain things of his past. He never thought of owning a house. But it all happened on the advice of his friend, Dutta.

No one knew then how unaffordable property would be, especially now; how fortunate one was to have a home.

(P.61)

Coming to the political aspects, earlier when Jayojit was in Claremont, he used to up-date his knowledge with all the happenings in India; but now, somehow he is no more interested. As the Admiral's thoughts moved on, he thought of Bijon, his occasional drinking partner and then enquiries his son about his remembrance of Bijon who has gone to Dubai recently. When both are just discussing the events of the past. Jayojit's mother is all the time busy with her daily chores, round the clock.

'She's become a household machine', thought Jayojit, a little unfairly, as her shadow passed by him, 'may be she's happy this way'. (P.63)

In the morning, the Admiral and his wife wake up early and go for a walk in the lane to breathe some fresh air. Still, the people were asleep, slowly set out to work, as very soon the cool atmosphere transforms into a hot one, just in two hours. In their walk, the Admiral remembers the mild paralysis stroke that struck him seven years ago; made him approach two doctors, one in the army hospital and another one Dr. Sen in the apartments, who advised him to take regular walk for being fit.

'You can walk your way into health, sir' the army doctor had said.

(P.67)
When Dr. Sen visits his house, Jayojit appeals to him to take time to visit his parents as he is much worried about his father's health. But Dr. Sen very subtly comments:

... 'that it'll be all right as long as he takes care of himself - and God knows I have other things to worry about!'
... 'the Admiral's health is all right, don't worry.'

(P.174)

He even remembers Mrs. Gupta's husband who lived in flat 7c, died last February because of paralysis attack. The chain of thoughts shifts from himself to his sons - Ranjit and Jayojit; Ranjit marries Anita and might be expecting issues. He even wishes his younger son Jayojit to get remarried but keeps silent as the wound is still fresh.

He'd like Jayojit to marry again.
Joy was thirty-seven; he wasn't Young any more. If he married now, the Admiral believed, it would be like attending to a wound when it was still fresh.

(P.68)

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 same time criticised 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.

(P.111)

In an editorial, in a newspaper, once Prof. Sen has pointed out, The problem we face with liberalization is not, after all, the loss of our culture and native traditions. No the problem is whether India can provide the basic infra-structure not only industrial infrastructure, but the infrastructure of human resources - that can not only benefit from but contribute to liberalization.

(P.112)

Jayojit feels like writing a letter to statesman, regarding the article. His point is -

... A note of caution about assuming that economic deregulation will be a panacea to all our problems ; but it will, no doubt be one to some of them.

(P.113)

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’.

(Pp.34-35)

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 pet animals, all are figuratively described.

There were trees in it-two
palm trees which seemed to have taken refuge here from a more exotic habitat, a mango tree-and flowering shrubs and even clone-like potted plants. Late in the morning, once or twice, Jayojit had woken up from jet-lag At dawn to see the mali alone among the pots, unwittingly scaring birds away, watering the plants. (P.35)

Later in the flat, Jayojit half-heartedly manages with the ‘lu-chis’ prepared by his mother; also receives instructions from his mother that it is too hot to take Bonny out in the afternoon. As Jayojit cannot sleep the first few nights, he just re-reads the news paper called statesman till he gets sleep and just silently slips into sleep after switching off the lamp.

‘But, baba,’ Bonny said very gravely, you can have cornflakes if you don’t want lu-chis’.

(P.41)
To the one side of the corridor, outside the flat, there is their neighbour’s flat; and to the other side they could see part of a cricket field that belonged to a well-known club. These days their relations with the neighbours have been very much confined and lessened.

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 neighbour’s flat, in their imagination, had moved further away.

(P.44)

While going through the family album, Jayojit comes across most of his childhood photographs consisting of his parents and his grand parents; among them is a photograph that consists of Jayojit and his brother Ranjit when they were thirteen and ten respectively. It has also a wedding photo bright with colour, of Ranjit and his wife. Ranjit fell in love with a girl called Anita. Added to this there are some other photographs of cousins and relatives.

Joyojit himself had never seen his father’s mother ; his father’s father had died when he was three. (P.49)

For a moment Jayojit recollects how they had a baby in 1987 and by 1989, there was a breach in their relation. From memories, Jayojit, very soon comes out of the past and walks back. His father, the Admiral has been proposing him last evening the idea of a second marriage. He does this with reference to the meetings he’s had with Arundhati seven months ago.
In the evenings, Jayojit and Bonny observe the clatter that came from the surrounding flats. The other big house opposite to theirs is 'The Jhunjhunwala house'. The Admiral says that they are big-shots owning an automobile industry.

'His father started out as a supplier to automobile industry '—' and now they're in all kinds of things including cement'.

(P.75)

Joyojit goes to the Grindlays Bank in the south, where he has an account. There he just comes to know about ANZ Ready money through ads in bank. As an NRI, he wishes to enter into the scheme, for the sake of easy foreign exchange.

He was transferring this money because, over the next two years at least, he'd be here for part of the year; that, after all, was the arrangement. Bonny was to be with him. Better to have some money earning interest when he was away.

(P.119)

He is busy settling all his transactions, meetings and so on that he is supposed to do in India. He goes to Bangladesh Biman's office to check their travelling dates.

As a part of his preparation to his return journey, he tallies all his accounts and maintains foreign exchange currency. The rate of it differs from magazine to magazine, time and again. He even has to re-confirm the Bangladesh Biman tickets. Later, he does some shopping in order to take certain presentations to some of his acquaintances.

He had wanted to buy a few things before he left - to give away as presents to some of those he knew
in Claremont. And a few things for his own home.

(P.165)

They are supposed to leave in July. And at any rate, Bonny would return to his mother in August. Mrs. Chatterjee wishes them to stay till September, which is highly impossible. During that month, the three day pujas will be conducted collectively by all the dwellers in the apartment with great pomp and show. But somehow Jayojit misses it regularly.

‘You’ll miss the Pujas’, she said. Last year they’d sat at home and listened to the drums beating downstairs and in the distance. They didn’t visit anyone; instead, they spoke to Jayojit on the telephone.

(P.137)

In the evening Jayo and Bonny spend their time playing table-tennis on one side of the hall and later take a small walk. While going back, Jayo regularly checks the post box. He remembers how three months after their marriage, his wife Amala wrote a letter addressing her mother-in-law from Arlington.

Three months after their wedding Amala had begun to write to her mother-in-law from Arlington. The letters came with Mrs. Chatterjee’s name on the envelope, Mrs. Sumitra Chatterjee, in a neat running hand at first unfamiliar.

(P.144)
When he is just approaching the lift, he comes across Mrs. Gupta. She just enquires casually of his well-being and wonders how he has spent one and half months in India. She even suggests to him to go back to America, because of the severe hot climatic conditions here. She tells him about her niece staying at Cambridge in Massachusetts.

‘Mr. Chatterjee, isn’t it?’ She asked sharply.
‘Yes’, said Jayojit; ...
‘How are you, Mrs. Gupta?’
‘Quite well’ - she replied.
‘one and a half months - in this weather!
Really, what endurance you have,
Mr. Chatterjee! Go back to America,
go back to America!’

(Pp.129, 130)

Jayojit very rarely visited his brother's house. This time his brother's family are expected to go to America. Jayojit and Amaia also at first had been in Arlington, later shifted to Claremont because of the severe hot temperature of the former. Even in the west certain places are hot and are at the most like Calcutta.

Jayojit and Bonny for sometime converse with a European woman wearing a Salwar Kameez in the airport lounge. Finally they settle themselves in a three seater with a computer and shoulder bag on the seat. During their conversation she mentions her name as Mary and says that she too claims her interest in 'Calcutta'.

‘What did you really think of Calcutta?’
Jayojit asked. ‘Was it too much for you?’
‘I liked it!’ she smiled, as if surprised herself.

(P.197)
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 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 ordinaries of life.

As Sagarika Ghose rightly points out-
"Chaudhuri nicely captures the timbre of life, the quality of the sunlight, the deadening but stable marriage of Jayojit’s parents and the way quite lives confront incomprehensible changes".²
REFERENCES

- Page Nos. in brackets refer to Amit Chaudhuri’s *A New World* (Picador, 2000) P.3
