

## AMNESIA AS DEFENCE MECHANISM IN AMIT CHAUDHURI'S *A NEW WORLD*

**Dr. Anuradha Singh**

*Associate Professor, G.D.H.G.College  
Moradabad*

### ABSTRACT:

*What Freud has called the 'concealment of memory', and psychologists call the 'repression of memory', has often been used as an effective literary ploy by diasporic writers to fight cultural angst and etch for themselves a place of belonging in their ever-shifting culturally reality.*

*Nirad C. Chaudhuri, A.K.Ramanujan, Rohinton Mistry R.Parthasarathy, to name only a few, have all reflected in their works that amnesia of the past is a necessary evil to cope with cultural fragmentation. Amit Chaudhuri is also a prominent member of this league of writers, and his *A New World* bears testimony to this.*

**Keywords:** *Amnesia, cultural fragmentation, past, post-colonial*

Freud's "concealment of memory", the concept of the 'repression of memory' in psychology, the term "pastness of the past" are all nomenclature of the very important phenomenon experienced by diasporas—that is, the negation of one's native culture in a desperate attempt to belong to a new, alien culture. This started as a colonial reverberance when native Indians, branded as inferior beings by the British, started adopting anglicised ways in order to 'fit in'. Why only in post-colonial India, even writers as recent as Gabriel Garcia Marquez has dealt with it in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, where he highlights the problem of linguistic ability of the native people being corroded by cultural erosion.

Awarded with the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2002, Chaudhuri's *A New World* happens to be his most thought provoking creation. The protagonist, an Indian dwelling in America for a living, comes to India to his midwest native home and equally modest parents, to spend his summer vacation. Jayojit Chatterjee has had a promising academic track, with a undergraduate degree in Economics from St.Stephen's, going on to study further on scholarship to California.

He marries Amala, a bengali girl from Sindh, but the marriage turns awry and the wife runs away with her gynaecologist after her son, Vikram's birth. When the novel starts, we see Jayojit coming to India to visit his parents in deep summer along with his americanised son, whose custody he had managed to retain after bitter legal fights.

The novel does not go deep enough into the psyche of the protagonist to delve on subjects like existential dilemma or adultery or for that matter emigration. The main part of the novel just enumerates the sentiments of three generations of bengalis put together during summer holidays. Describing petty details of their everyday life like food habits, leasure times, parenting techniques is the novelists way of portraying the remnants of native memories in a mind which has been forced to adapt in a foreign culture.

The days are juxtaposed with the grandmother's preparing of native delicacies for her American grandson on the one hand and occasional references to the dazzle of the American life on the other. This juxtaposition, among several others in the novel highlights the delicate balance that a person uprooted from native soil, trying to strike roots in a foreign one , experiences. As one day rolls monotonously into another, the as the heat of the atmosphere rises.

The survival kit that Jayojit unpacks to counter the heat n dust of his homeland, to which he has now become, ironically, maladjusted, is a metaphor for the intangible survival mode of cultural amnesia of people like the protagonist. The branded items of toiletries— the Head and Shoulder shampoo, the Old Spice shaving cream, the Aquafresh toothpaste—are all sad reminders to the disconnect between the homeland n the emigrant. It is a jarring foil , too, to the atmosphere of the simple middle-class household where he had grown up and where even today his parents live a life untouched by globalisation.

Jayojit feels as alienated from his father as he does from his country. The once strong filial bond has now been reduced to just superficial, matter-of-fact conversations. The fragile bond between the native parents nd the American son is thus explained in the novel:

They – Jayojit and his father- communicated, except for a few words and sentences, in English, establishing a rapport, a bluff friendship, which excluded the tenderness of the mother- son relationship- the latter finding expression in the mother's homely, slightly irritating Bengali, and talk centered round questions such as whether her son was hungry , or whether he haf a bath.( *A New World* :6-7)

The description of the Indian way of life is a garish foil to that of the rather aloof and unsentimental American way of life as described by the novelist in the story. While the Indian way of values is showed to be grounded in loyalty and simplicity, the American counterpart is all rather casual. Jayojit's wife decides to choose adultery and gives the most casual reason for it. She says nonchalantly: " He was kind to me". This shows how deep the lacuna in the emotional aspect of a First World country life goes. People hanker for even simple acts of humanity like kindness, love of course is a thing not easily found then.

The parallels drawn by critics between Jayojit the economist and Amartya Sen the renowned economist and Nobel laureate of India origin has been decried by the novelist himself. That he was frequently equated with the great Amartya Sen even by characters within the novel, though, is undeniable of the fact that the comparison played an important role in the back of the mind of the novelist while painting Jayojit's character.

Names of other great Indians of global importance are also intertwined into the narrative scattered throughout from time to time. Mahatma Gandhi, Indira Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru are all mentioned and juxtaposed with names of great people like Margaret Trudeau and Henry Kissinger.

Thus the vacation that Amit Chaudhuri's Jayojit undertakes is portrayed by the novelist as vague ditch attempt to decipher the cultural amnesia which stands as an unsurpassable moat between the Third-World and First-World realities of the protagonist. Valerie Miner rightly says:

Reading the novel is like living inside someone afflicted with clinical depression . . . . . even the vocabulary descends into a dull vagueness about "someones" and "somewheres". (Span: 30)

Thus the major portion of Chaudhuri's narrative, it can be safely claimed, deals not with the superficial differences in the life of an economist who vaguely resembles Amartya Sen in his biographical details, nor with the way he tries to revisit his native ambience, but on how amnesia of one's true Self is the ploy wielded by displaced individuals to bridge gaps between their two conflicting realities.

## REFERENCES:

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