

**CONFLICT OF THE EASTERN AND WESTERN CULTURES IN AMIT
CHAUDHURI'S *AFTERNOON RAAG***

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Abstract

The present study will focus on the topic Multiculturalism and Marginalism. Multiculturalism is an ideology that promotes the institutionalization of communities containing multiple cultures. In its wider sense, Multiculturalism denotes of race, class, gender, language, culture, sexual orientation, or disability within one society. In its ideal form, Multiculturalism respects boundaries cultures in the private domain but requires the acceptance of a single culture and a single set of individual rights in the public domain. Originally a concept in social anthropology – J. Furnivall's field studies of 1939 were the first to focus or plurality within a society. The person in the multicultural society faces newness as everything is new to him. The person who encounters the new culture is eventually marginalized within the cultures. Multiculturalism is an umbrella term under which a diverse number of issues related to race and ethnicity are discussed. This paper will discuss the effects of Marginalism faced by people in a multicultural society and it will give voice to those people.

The adaptation or adjustment process usually starts within an initial euphoria about the foreignness of the host culture. The individual feels isolated and misses the familiar symbols, attitudes and habits of the culture of origin. The scenario of experiencing Multiculturalism and thus facing Marginalism has been depicted in many works. One such work that gives the voice to marginalized multicultural people is Amit Chaudhuri's novel *Afternoon Raag*. Amit Chaudhuri was born in Calcutta and England is his working base; he remains an Indian national and has mostly limited himself to writing about his own society and culture. *Afternoon Raag* is a semi autobiographical novel as the writer himself went through marginalization in multicultural society. *Afternoon Raag* explores an Oxford student's memories of his family and his singing teacher in his

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unknown place, London, to which he is unable to relate to. He visits his region, Calcutta at intervals through nostalgia and memories as an outsider which gives him a sense of relief. The student is unable to fit in the milieu of Oxford and visits his region through nostalgia. Chaudhuri recreates the state of mind of a young man coming to terms with loneliness and alienation in a unique way as he himself felt for his homeland.

Keywords: Culture, Multiculturalism, Marginalisation, Nostalgia, Alienation.

Culture is an important part of a land. To begin with, we are confronted with the question: what is culture? The Oxford English Dictionary defines culture as “a particular form or type of intellectual development in a society generated by its distinctive customs, achievements and outlook.” Broadly speaking, culture is taken as constituting the way of life of an entire society and includes codes of manners, dress, language, rituals, social customs and folklore of a nation. Every nation has a distinct culture of its own and every culture has its own curiousness and fondness, which evoke a mixed reaction in one from a different cultural setting. With the immigration of people belonging to different places new cultures are introduced into that nation making it a multicultural. T.S. Eliot in his *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* observes:

Culture is too vast and baffling a term to be precisely defined. Culture is a quest for good but it is not good if the quest is not free choice. The quest and the choice are, therefore, the two ingredients of Culture and the tradition is formed by the culmination of centuries of history, or a tradition may be defined as a passage, in which there is both persistence and renewal (21).

Multiculturalism is a form of Culture, an essential condition of civilised existence in today's world. In its wider sense, Multiculturalism denotes diversity of race, class, gender, language, culture, sexual orientation or disability within one society. In its narrower sense, the one that is more pertinent for post-colonial studies and it refers to ethnic diversity within one society. The underlying premise of both senses is recognition of diversity, as opposed to a monoculturalistic attitude that is based on a belief in the supremacy of one social or cultural group and demands monocentric assimilation to the dominant culture. In its ideal form, Multiculturalism respects boundaries between cultures in the private domain but requires the acceptance of a single Culture and a single set of individual rights in the public domain. Originally, a concept in social anthropology – J. Furnivall's field studies of 1939 were the first to focus on plurality within a society – Multiculturalism has turned into a household word as well as a technical term used in diverse fields as politics, sociology, education, economics, literature, urban planning, law and psychology. The fundamental question is if Multiculturalism is to be seen as a set of identifiable features of a particular community, as a political attitude, a philosophy, a movement, or even measurement to encourage diversity within a community and promote equal opportunities for minority groups. In earlier approaches to Multiculturalism culture was largely seen as an essentialism that was a property of a particular social group, under the influence of post structuralist ideology and increasing migration, globalization and dislocation of culture. Multiculturalism which arises as an effect of colonization has varied realizations in post colonial societies: India is racially, culturally, linguistically, ethnically and

religiously the most diverse country in the world. The culture of India has been shaped by its long history, unique geography and diverse demography. India's languages, religions, dance, music, architecture and customs differ from place to place within the country, but nevertheless possess a commonality. The culture of India is an amalgamation of these diverse sub-cultures spread all over the Indian sub-continent and traditions that are several millennia old. Sunanda Mongia comments thus:

India functions as a central metaphor frame work, even when a novelist, for example Bharati Mukherjee, refuses her Indian roots and prefers to call her novels examples of "New American Cultures"- Inevitably, whether an Indian or an expatriate, the novelist obsessively return to India, as a concept an actuality, a symbol, a network of Cultures, myths and relationship which ensnares every author. (218)

The main argument against Multiculturalism held by monoculturalists is the position that diversity disrupts the fabric of social life rather than maintaining the unity of a social group. Another criticism, held by multiculturalists themselves, is that a liberal focus on diversity upholds the status quo of power relations by keeping ethnic minorities from effectively gaining equality, while only theoretically acknowledging equal rights. There is hardly a country in the industrialised world today where one can find an ethnically homogeneous population. The issue of Multiculturalism has acquired importance and urgency in view of the problems in a mix of people with different ethnicities and religions, living together.

Dislocations and Multiculturalism are concepts which address the most ancient problems of human society along with the greatest challenges of times. Human society has developed from a nomadic culture into a rooted one. But with new capitalistic forces unleashed, migrations and dislocations have become the order of the day. The boundaries of the nation state are getting fainter and fainter paradoxically at a time when nationalism is resurfacing with unprecedented aggressiveness. No human society has been able to avoid either migration or dislocation for whatever reasons; and consequently none has been able to avoid Multiculturalism. India, Malaysia, Singapore, U.K and USA, Canada and Australia, European nations whether large or small, all have a mixed population where different languages, nationalisms and race intermingle. The West Indies is a classic example of a "created" multicultural society.

An immigrant in a society faces newness. Everything is new to him in the new society and he encounters the new culture. He doesn't know what culture exactly he should adopt. The adaptation or adjustment process usually starts with an initial euphoria about the foreignness of the host culture. Everything is new and exciting and the sojourner is in the role of a tourist exploring the foreign environment. The euphoria is followed by a crisis, the actual culture shock. The individual feels isolated and misses the familiar symbols, attitudes and habits of the culture of origin. During this phase of time the sojourner has to face different symptoms ranging from homesickness to depression and illness. The immigrant survives by nostalgia for the past. So nostalgia is the first step, for it sustains memory, even creates memory. Memory is the scaffolding that keeps the self from crumbling that prevents the present from obliterating the past, prevents the now from annihilating the then. Memory is what stops the writer from being easily consumed by the new culture. Every novelist's heart is in India and even when westernized life style is presented, the locale is India, Indian culture and tradition.

The scenario of experiencing Multiculturalism and the conflicts of the Eastern and Western Cultures have been depicted in many works. One such work that gives voice to the multicultural people is Amit Chaudhuri's novel *Afternoon Raag*. Amit Chaudhuri, though not a prolific writer has become highly celebrated across the world at a very young age of forty one. He was born in 1962 in Calcutta and grew up in Bombay. He went to Britain to study at University College London and then at Balliol college, Oxford. He has seen and brought up in the influence of different Cultures. He himself longed for his society. Keeping England as his working base, he remains an Indian national and has mostly limited himself to writing about society, history and culture of his own society. His worldwide visibility has been augmented by various prestigious international awards and the admiration and appreciation he has got for his sophisticated, suggestive, lyrical and evocative literary writing. Living both in India and abroad he ignores the post colonial and post modernist concerns of his contemporaries and explores the Indian sensibility through his works in a way peculiar to himself. Chaudhuri himself belongs to the influential upper class but he aligns himself with the middle class of India and this is the quality which makes him unique as a novelist as his focus is on local culture. For him all places are apt for presenting culture and that may be the lanes of Oxford, the streets of Calcutta and the suburbs of Bombay like St. Cyril Road. He makes his practice as a creative writer quite clear in the following statement in an interview by Fernando Galvan *Wasafiri* in "On Belonging and not Belonging: A Conversation with Amit Chaudhuri":

Now the kind of India I write about is a lower middle class or middle-class India, because I write about Calcutta in particular and Bengal, a post-independence Bengal reality, lyricising the experiences of the middle class and the spaces in which they live, I am not writing about a fantastic India.
(48)

Afternoon raag is a semi autobiographical novel and is clearly drawn from the personal experience being about an Indian student at Oxford and his memories of Calcutta, India. It focuses on the conflict of the Eastern and Western cultures as the novel arises out of an Indian's experience of being in England, an experience which, in turn, redefines and sharpens his memories of home and his perception of his own Indianness. Chaudhuri's artistic focus falls on customs, traditions, superstitions, the way people, talk, take bath, drape themselves, meet, worship and indulge in singing and music and the people, things and happenings interact with one another. The ordinary daily life of people, the ordinary daily happenings, the routine changes in weather and season, are the stuff that makes the writings of Chaudhuri. Chaudhuri's efficiency is based on these local features and Dr. Arun Kumar Yadav has observed Chaudhuri's novels in "Socio-Cultural Aspects of Life: A study of Amit Chaudhuri's Novels":

It is not surprising that much of Amit Chaudhuri's novels are a celebration of local cultures and subjectivities. His uniqueness as a writer, however, rests largely on the fact that his most sensitive evocation of locality are done through an exclusive focus on the ordinary and the quotidian in fragmented, episodic form, never woven into holistic narrative, much less one about the development of the modern India. Locality and commonplace, in fact, construct themselves as mutual preconditions in his novels. (2)

The novel is a manifestation of the mental states of a person caused by his interiorised experience. It is a poetic expression of the author. It deals with the experience and impressions of a young Indian student. Chaudhuri recreates the state of mind of a young man coming to terms with loneliness, nostalgia and alienation in a unique way. The narrator feels so lonely in the new culture and feels mingled up by the culture he was brought up in and the culture he is living in. He is not able to adopt the new culture and feels alienated and longs for his homeland and his parents. The narrator chooses Indianness and nostalgia to overcome the alienation, homesickness caused in the new society. His choice is brought into relief by Sharma's response to England. Sharma is an Indian from a small village and author's only male friend in an unknown land. The author wants to convey to his readers that it is the nostalgia of their cultures which brings them together. They were two Indians who might never have met in India but in Oxford they are good friends giving a feeling of home. The author explains that it is the place which brings them together, he meant that they were both Indians, they would hang out almost every other day. The author wants to overcome his nostalgia and loneliness, so he loves outing but mostly with Sharma and explains:

Sharma and I were roaming at our ease in loose shirts, two Indians who might never have met in India, feeling at home, giving studious attention, as if it truly mattered, to shop-windows and an ancient organ-grinder, edging our way towards Westgate, both of us feeling boyish, and I especially younger because I was wearing sandals. (199)

The nostalgia from the very beginning is very strong and due to that nostalgia he could not be able to be with his friends and the society there. It was the place which always forced him and kept him away from his friends. He would rather avoid his friends and wouldn't be able to keep up the appointments. His girl friend, Shenaz is another example in this as they used to keep promises but could not keep them as they were occupied with other things. This happened due to his busyness with his nostalgia. He says:

We made appointments and did not keep them; we made appointments to discuss when we might meet; we liked each other but were occupied, like children, with other things to do. Sometimes I am nostalgic for that make-believe busyness, full of innocence, of having 'other things to do', the prelapsarian background of lectures, bookshops, friends, our lives spent generously and routinely like rain-showers, stopping and starting again. (198)

The perception that the narrator gains into Oxford is not shared by his friends Sharma, Shenaz and Mandira. Shenaz and Mandira are his girl friends but neither is destined for fulfilment. Sharma is not like many Indians who go to Oxford and change their style of living. All the same, he is open-handed which enables him picking up English traditions, and habits and making English friends. Thus the Impact of being in a foreign land was "more direct, more immediately generous" (129) on Sharma than it was on the narrator. At the same he does not betray that he feels homesick or alienated. The narrator is fond of Sharma's company but does not allow him to interrupt his world of sad longings, loneliness and stillness. Nor can Shenaz Mandira, the two women who "were waiting to happen" to him (126). The two women with who he stumbles in and out of love and he vacillates between the two but both of them are not able to give him the sense of belonging. In Oxford many things happened to him but he is not able to

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absorb into the ambience of Oxford as for him Oxford is a strange and he is not able to relate to.

“Strange place, Oxford, and strange discoveries one makes within it!

Strange students’ rooms, with their own, always slightly unfamiliar, dimensions” (255).

The protagonist is an immense lover of music and Sohanlal his music teacher used to teach his mother and the author in Bombay. While discussing about his teacher, he has also given the importance of harmonium, a musical instrument and special focus is given on the harmonium as it is a harmonium made in Calcutta by Pakrashi. The letter of PAKRASHI in capital letters is carved on the wood. For a person who is related to music, each and every thing is very important and the instruments are very safely and carefully used by them as they are their life. It is the eternal sense of Indian classical music which inspires Chaudhuri most, and his obsession with music can be seen in his novels such as *Freedom Song*, *Afternoon Raag*, and *The Immortals*. He puts elevated premium on the music by treating it as a means to attain sublimity and immortality. He is personally interested in North Indian Classical music and has a few albums to his credit. Though his love of music is intense, he does not claim to be a professional. He affirms this in an interview with Sumana R. Ghosh:

Music is an important constituent of the culture or family I grew up in.... However, I discovered classical music for myself.... I’ve become interested in Indian Classical music as a subject.... I’ve become interested in music and the world of capital, music, art and the marketplace. But I have to say that I’m not conscious of the analogies between my narrative technique and Indian classical music. (176-77)

At last the author returned to Calcutta from England after completing his course work for which he has gone there. His parents were waiting for him outside the arrival area at the Calcutta airport. The old airport has gone and new domestic airport welcomes the arriving passengers. Most of them were from Calcutta itself. As a child, the author has come here with his parents for his holidays but this time he has come finally to stay here in Calcutta. While on his way back home he observes Calcutta through his eyes after so many years. He sees that nothing much has changed for the last twenty years.

Chaudhuri’s novel is remarkable for its re-creation of an overseas student’s state of mind during his three years visit at Oxford. The novel is an example of a migrant author’s transcultural innovation. In *Afternoon Raag* Chaudhuri has shown the conflict of the Eastern and Western cultures going on in the mind of the narrator. The narrator, who is uprooted from his native culture, is not able to relate to the new culture easily. He tries to make adjustments and longs for his culture and his homeland. His state of mind is brought to relief by nostalgia and memories for his homeland

Thus we can conclude that culture is the unique possession of man, who is born and brought up in a cultural environment that constructs his consciousness. Man is not only a social animal but also a cultural being and he cannot survive as a man without culture. Culture fulfils our needs and represents the entire achievements of mankind. Culture nurtures his identity, habits and mindset but, when uprooted from his native Culture, he finds it difficult to fit into the milieu of new culture. He feels out of place and alienated. In course of time, a person so displaced may learn the art of surviving in a strange place, get used to it, and even do well there, but his memory often takes him back to what he has been distanced from. Even though it is

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famed to play tricks, memory can and does have its moments of strength and power, which stimulate people to visit and revisit their past, their place, their home, and country, to create narratives of dislocation.

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