



# Cultural Performativity, Identity Struggles, and Displacement in Amit Chaudhuri's *A New World*: An Exploration through Milton Singer's Theory of Cultural Performance

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## Abstract

*From the viewpoint of the depth of displacement and identity, which focuses on the perspectives of personal exploration nourished by the theory of Cultural Performance by Milton Singer, is the manifestation of cultural performativity in cross-cultural experiences. This article vividly speaks about the story of a seven-year-old Bonny from A New World, perfectly penned by Amit Chaudhuri. The novel challenges the conventional adaptations between American and Indian culture, where the Jayojit and his wife admit their son Bonny to the circumambient via their separation. Here, Milton Singer's theory of Cultural Performance plays a vital part in Bonny's daily routine in India, where he comes to spend his summer vacation in his grandparents' house. Concentrating on his activities based on both cultures, readers tend to question Bonny's identity by restricting his freedom of action and innocence. In order to adapt, the characters from A New World who returned from America struggled to perform Indian culture in their day-to-day life of food, fashion, bodily expressions, rituals, and customs to construct identity in displacement. In that mainly, little Bonny experiences difficulties in every moment of his dogmatic situation because Milton Singer says that India cannot turn to the modern way cause of the tie with its religion and tradition along with the historical appeal. The paper discusses the way Bonny, by practicing both cultures, tries to accommodate himself with his grandparents' love and father's control in his mother's absence. It even argues with Milton Singer's point of Western ethnocentrism and advises the readers to look at each culture on its own terms. Furthermore, this qualitative research paper ventures deep into the theory of Cultural Performance and brings out the various aspects of performative discourses.*

**Keywords:** adaptation, cultural performativity, displacement, identity, struggle

## Introduction

The maze of identity formation, especially in the state of displacement and cultural unification, has been traversed in a huge number of literary works in Indian Literature. Along with many works, Amit Chaudhuri's *A New World*, which was published in the year 2000, offered a poignant exploration of these themes. Being the center of the attraction, Bonny, a seven-year-old boy who is connected with two extreme ends of the cultural worlds. That is his

American upbringing, where he is being brought up by his parents and his real Indian heritage. This research paper explores the theory of Cultural Performance, as flourished by Milton Singer, to test the ways in which Bonny's correlation with the culture of both India and America during his days of summer vacation in his grandparents' house located in India. Till the end of the article, the behaviour of a little Bonny will be seen as a performative act which is enlightened by both American and Indian culture



and tradition. An American Anthropologist, Milton Singer's one of his theories is Cultural Performance and argues that culture is not stable but is diligently performed in everyday life via social behaviours, rituals, and interactions. This article strongly says that the identity of Bonny is not a passive construct but is actively negotiated by his involvement in and reaction to the cultural practices he experiences each day in India. His adaptation towards Indian culture and heritage becomes a form of struggle, where cultural codes of both traditions collide and seem to force him to integrate competing cultural demands. This paper aims to explore the complications of cultural adaptation in the novel *A New World*, the master piece of the great Amit Chaudhuri, and to enquire how identity is performed and established among displacement. The center of the argument is that Bonny's experience of cultural performance, compresses the wider challenges faced by individuals going forth the trivial space between two extreme cultural worlds, and that Milton Singer's theory of cultural performativity furnishes a valuable lens through which to understand the delicate dynamics of resistance, identity, and adaptation.

### Literature Review

On 2019 Dr. V. Meenakshi Assistant Professor of English Government Arts and Science College Orathanad, Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu has published a paper on "Socio-Cultural Aspects in Amit Chaudhuri's *A New World*" vol 4 no.1 by BODHI International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Science.

Mr. Jagadeesh Kittur, a Ph.D Research Scholar, Dept. of English Karnatak University, Dharwad Karnatak State has published an article on "The Cultural and Social Issues in Amit Chaudhuri's *A New World*" in Vol. 5, Issue 02, February 2019, ISSN: 2395-6968 by Epitome: international journal of interdisciplinary studies.

Sindhu Chandrasekaran and N.S. Vishnu Priya from Vellor Institute of Technology University has published a research article on "Diasporic Responsiveness in Amit Chaudhuri's Novel *A New World*". By ResearchGate

Dr. S. Karthik Kumar, G. Ganga has published a paper on "Tradition vs. Modernity: A Study of

Amit Chaudhuri's *A New World*" in Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry (TOJQI) Volume 12, Issue 7 July 2021: 12381 – 12387

Sovan Chakraborty IResearch Scholar in English in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences of Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee, and Nagendra Kumar Professor of English in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences of Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee has published a paper on Seeing Double': Exploring the Flâneur's Gaze in Amit Chaudhuri's *A New World* on August 18, 2016 in Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities.

Ms. S. Shyamala, M.A., M.Phil. Assistant Professor Department of English Dr. Sivanthi Aditanar College of Engineering Tiruchendur has published a paper on Old Snapshots in New Album: Realism in Amit Chaudhuri's *A New World* in international journal of English language, literature and humanities ISSN 2321 - 7065 Volume 1 Issue IV Dec 2013.

### Theoretical Framework on Milton Singer's Cultural Performance Theory

Cultural Performance, the theory of Milton Singer highlights the point that culture is not a fixed or permanent entity but rather a particular factor that is enacted and performed by each individual within the specific circumstances. For Milton Singer, culture is an active and dynamic process that is structured by the everyday rituals, practices, and performances of individuals. He postulates that every group of people, the so-called society, has its own series of cultural performances, which are the living pronouncement of culture through rituals, actions, and social interactions. These performances are sculpted by the beliefs, societal norms, and values that individuals incorporate but also reform, negotiate, and at times resist by their own actions.

In the context of the novel *A New World*, the character Bonny's experiences in his motherland India, can be seen as a continuing series of cultural performances, as Bonny navigates and acts out both American and Indian cultural codes. The theory of Cultural Performance by Singer becomes typically useful in comprehending the way Bonny's identity is carved not only by the cultural practices he



experiences but also by his attempts to enact them within the boundaries of his own comprehension and practices. His very own actions of rituals, and even his bodily expressions, reflect the process of negotiation between the two cultures, which does not simply clash with each other but also notify each other in multiplex ways.

The theory of Cultural Performance by Milton Singer provides a valuable framework to explore the ways in which Bonny's identity is shaped by his interconnections with cultural performances of both the cultures. This takes place in all the means, especially in his struggle with Indian fashion, food, bodily expressions, and rituals. By performing components of both the cultures, the young Bonny becomes a spectacle of cultural conflict and processing negotiation, where identity is neither completely American nor completely Indian. Instead, it has a constant flux, carved by the power of displacement and the parameters of those around him.

### **Bonny's Struggle with Displacement and Identity Formation**

In Amit Chaudhuri's *A New World* (2000), a seven-year-old Bonny's life is noted by the dilemma between the Indian and American cultural worlds. Being born to the parents who have migrated to the United States with the hope of becoming the citizens of the country and then, unfortunately separated by fate, Bonny's identity is deeply fractured by his diasporic ways of life experiences. His rare visit to India, where he loves spending his summer vacation along with his grandparents and bound in their love, becomes a pivotal moment of experience in the exploration of his cultural identity. This takes place within the cultural confines of his own grandparents' house, where Bonny faces the complexities and difficulties of adaptation. This tends to make a force on Bonny to perform cultural rituals and roles which he does not even fully understand or feel a part of.

The identity of the little Bonny is defined by his continuous navigation of being in between these two worlds, each of which holds its own set of expectations. His father, Jyojith, who wants Bonny to live a standard life in the United States, embraced Western ideals as its process, and at the same time

expects Bonny also to align with the modern, idiosyncratic ethos of American society. On the other hand, Bonny's grandparents, who personify the Indian traditional values the society, foist their own series of cultural norms that are intertwined with tradition, religion, and historical appeal. Bonny's fight to reunite these varied cultural expectations compels him to fall under a performative position, where he himself has to navigate the cultural codes of both Indian and American societies in order to survive and prove his existence in the world of identity crisis.

Milton Singer's theory of Cultural Performance provides help to explain the way in which Bonny, as a young seven-year-old child, is consistently in the process of performing various aspects of both Indian and American cultures. Every single aspect of the little Bonny's life becomes a performative act as he practiced Western ideas the whole of his life, and came to live in India for a few months for his summer vacation. It includes the clothes he wears, the food he consumes, and very clearly seen in the ways he interacts with his family members to somehow make place for his fractured identity. His struggle in adapting to all the cultural performances throws back the deeper difficulty of every individual in diasporic situations, who are always caught between the two extremes of the worlds, neither of which completely accepts them.

### **Cultural Performativity in the Context of Indian and American Norms**

The skirmish between Indian and American cultural practices is the central theme in the novel *A New World* by Amit Chaudhuri. In the novel, the little Bonny, who comes to spend his summer vacation to India, ventures to amalgamate into Indian society is focusing on the performative nature of cultural identity. The variance in fashion, food, rituals, traditional practices, and bodily expressions makes a perceptible tension for Bonny, whose identity is built in relation to both Indian and American cultures. The novel brings forth these differences not as isolated or alienated elements but as interrelated practices that shape the life experience of the little Bonny and also the other characters of the novel.



For example, Bonny's encounter with food in his grandparents' house in India is pronounced by his struggle in adapting to the flavours that he is not familiar with and the eating habits of his grandparents' house. This seemingly tedious element of life turns out to be a plot of cultural negotiation, where Bonny is forced to perform his adjustment to the Indian culture by learning to accept the taste of the foods that are so strange to his American upbringing. Likewise, his interconnections with his grandparents, who have a particular expectation about his behaviour, have become another field of understanding for the cultural performance of Bonny. The belief of his grandparents are frequently at odds with the more lavish, permissive attitudes he experiences in his house in America. This inconsistency reflects the broader pressures between the values of modernity and tradition, which are incorporated in the efforts of the characters to adjust and alter the cultural expectations of their own respective societies.

Bonny's struggle to merge both these cultural norms voices to a greater issue of identity in displacement. Milton Singer's theory proposes that cultural performance involves not only about adopting the implementations of a given culture but also the continuing process of negotiation, resistance, and adaptation. The difficulties of Bonny are not truly about mocking the cultural practices, but with regard to finding a way to convert them into his own. It is also an act that needs him to resist and negotiate the power of himself in a world where the borders between the two cultures are constantly changing.

### **Ethnocentrism and Western Hegemony: A Critique of the Cultural Divide**

In Milton Singer's critique of Western ethnocentrism, he challenges the supposition that Western cultures are condescending to non-Western cultures. This critique is especially related in the context of the novel *A New World*, in which the characters, particularly Jyojith, Bonny's father, carry the implanted confidence in the superiority of the practices of Western cultures with them. Jyojith, father of Bonny, who has settled in America for years, incorporates a Westernized worldview that gives importance to autonomy, individual freedom, and modernity. This worldview clashes sharply with

the more collectivist values of the traditional bond that Bonny encounters in India.

The father of Bonny's attempts to force Western ideas on his son reflects the wider power flux between non-Western and Western cultures. In this case, Bonny becomes a playground for cultural hegemony, where the values of Western ideas of modernity and individualism are set against the huge traditional and collective values of Indian society. Milton Singer's critique of Western ethnocentrism emphasizes the importance of seeing each culture in its own terms, without forcing one culture's values upon the other. In the novel *A New World*, this critique is manifested in the struggles of Bonny to adjust and adapt to a culture that he is unable to accept or understand entirely. His attempts to enact the culture of India are fraught with the difficulties of cultural imposition, as he is trapped between two different cultures that are both foreign and familiar.

### **Conclusion**

This research paper has traversed the themes of adaptation, displacement, and cultural identity in the novel *A New World*, by Amit Chaudhuri, with a special focus on the character of Bonny, a seven-year-old boy, and his interconnections with the American and Indian cultural worlds. Through the spectacle of Milton Singer's Cultural Performance theory, this particular paper has proved that the identity of Bonny is actively performed by his connection with both cultures, and that the struggle of his is to combine these cultures, and reflects the wider challenges of identity formation in the context of diaspora. Milton Singer's critique of Western ethnocentrism further enumerates the ways in which the dynamics of cultural power that shapes Bonny's experiences, as he negotiates the problematic beliefs of his parents, his grandparents, and also the larger cultural environment. Bonny's journey in the novel *A New World* demonstrates the performativity as a nature of cultural identity, where the partition between cultures is constantly shifting, and very importantly, the identity is structured by the ongoing negotiation of the norms of culture and expectations. Ultimately, this paper concludes by making a point that Bonny's struggles are not unique to the world, but it's a representation of the broader struggles



of every individual in a world which is marked by cultural negotiation, displacement, and resistance.

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