

**Quest for Identity in Diasporic Space: A Study of Amit Chaudhuri's
'Odysseus Abroad'**

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Abstract:

Amit Chaudhuri is a versatile Indian artist who excels in various creative disciplines such as novel writing, poetry, essay writing, criticism, editing, singing, and music composition. He has the position of a professor specialising in Contemporary Literature at the University of East Anglia. Due to his exceptional academic ability and profound creativity, he has produced a collection of outstanding literary masterpieces. His novel, *Odysseus Abroad*, is a remarkable work of literature that explores the experiences of Ananda, a young individual who has settled in London, through the lens of diaspora. The story takes place over a single day, providing a vivid portrayal of Ananda's existence. The main character is experiencing a longing for home and feels like a foreigner in an unfamiliar territory. He finds himself torn between the idealised vision of the new world and the harsh truth of being disregarded. His uncle Radhesh, a significant character in the narrative, has been grappling with establishing his identity for almost three decades. The narrative revolves around both characters and reveals the disillusionment they experience in the new territory. Frequently, the narrative returns to their current native place, which is Bangladesh. These two figures represent those who are striving to attain a fresh start in a foreign place, a goal that may be exceedingly difficult to accomplish. This study examines the feelings of 'alienation' and 'identity crisis' that the characters suffer, as well as their search for a sense of identity.

Keywords: alienation, identity, diaspora, cultural negotiation, longing for home, nostalgia etc.

Amit Chaudhuri is a multi-talented Indian artist, proficient in the fields of novel writing, poetry, essay writing, literary criticism, editing, singing, and music composition. He has the position of a professor specialising in Contemporary Literature at the University of East Anglia. The novel *Odysseus Abroad* is a

compelling diasporic narrative that chronicles a single day in the life of Ananda, a twenty-two-year-old resident of London. The main character is experiencing a longing for home and believes that he is an alienated individual in unfamiliar territory. He finds himself torn between the idealised vision of the new world and the harsh truth of being disregarded. Radhesh, the protagonist's uncle, is a significant character in the story. He has been facing challenges in his efforts to achieve success for over three decades. This study examines the themes of 'alienation', 'identity crisis', and the characters 'search for identity'.

The inhabitants of the newly settled territory consistently experience a feeling of uncertainty. They are aware of the fact that they are residing in a territory that is not their own, and they do not feel comfortable or familiar with it. Events occurring in other regions of the world further amplify their sense of insecurity. In this tale, Ananda and his uncle experience anxiety when they observe news coverage of a battle occurring in another location.

He had no desire to perish and he had no desire for the world to be destroyed (as it appeared likely to happen at any moment), but he couldn't afford to devote excessive time contemplating the imminent threat of death that loomed over humanity (5).

The sensation of insecurity is prevalent among individuals residing in the diaspora.

Typically, a significant number of Indians migrate to foreign countries in search of better opportunities, such as pursuing advanced education or securing jobs. This novel depicts the lives of these two distinct categories of individuals. For instance, Radhesh has been residing in London for over three decades, whilst Anandha is a student. Cynthia and Vivek Patel, who are his flatmates, are also present to pursue higher education.

Regrettably, none of them demonstrate sincerity or dedication towards education.

Cynthia was a unique type of woman - a social climber, similar to her boyfriend - that Ananda couldn't fully comprehend, particularly due to the combination of traits: modern yet lacking in intellectual depth, and independent... (7).

Despite being from the same country, they were unable to adapt to each other. They reside in separate emotional realms. They are unconcerned about the allocation of shared living space. For instance, Ananda is unable to endure the cacophony generated by the flatmates during late hours in the guise of parties.

Ananda disrupts them every morning with his vocal exercises. Chaudhuri observes that contemporary Indian students in London have little need to study, which

is unsurprising. In addition, who visits London specifically to engage in managerial activities? (8).

The divide between the Indian neighbours is further revealed during one of Ananda's mother's visits. She reprimands them for disrupting her son, who is pursuing a legitimate degree at a reputable university. She emphasises that he is undertaking a challenging journey, with his father financing his education. Indians sometimes go abroad to take satisfaction in receiving a degree in a foreign country. They lack genuine motivation towards their cause, which will likely result in failed schooling and profession.

Ananda, like many other young people, is captivated by the allure of life in a foreign country and wants to relinquish his Indian identity. He endeavours to evade the harsh actuality of India's history.

He made a brief attempt to find a link between London and Bombay but was unsuccessful. This made him feel uncomfortable, in addition to feeling insulted by being governed by this country!" (11).

His quest to assimilate into mainstream English society compels him to forsake aspects associated with his Indian identity. His enthusiasm for the West is at its zenith. He was not actively involved in Indian politics but had a casual and superficial interest in British politicians. This interest was driven by the debates, the feigned outrage, the diverse range of accents, the comforting sound of Tony Benn's "s" sounds, his compelling and persuasive speeches by the fireside, and how he held his pipe. Additionally, the individual was intrigued by the wiry trade union leaders. (11). Ananda's inclination to fully engage with the settled land's culture is evident. He is captivated by anything that is not from his own country.

Diasporic writers typically reveal the fundamental falsehood of the Western world. In the given passage, Chaudhury discusses the existing inequality in English society, drawing upon the ideas of Marx and Shelley. Chaudhury states that the rich have experienced an increase in wealth while the poor have faced a decline in their economic status. Consequently, the State is caught in a precarious situation, oscillating between the dangers of anarchy and despotism (12). Simultaneously, the novelist ensures to highlight the prosperity of England and its citizens.

Lucky island, abundant in windfalls, rewards, and fortune (14).

The unfamiliarity of life in a new land sometimes leads to feelings of isolation and alone. In this work, Ananda frequently experiences feelings of solitude, which prompts his search for self-identity. He is tormented by feelings of isolation since he relocated to the new flat.

...this prior existence was a well-established characteristic of English coexistence (10).

He was overwhelmed by an intense feeling of loneliness that was so profound that even self-pity couldn't alleviate it. Throughout the day, he occasionally neglected to observe midday, postponing his meal due to the monotonous nature of the task, as he prioritised sleeping and sporadically waking up. However, none of these actions can be compared to the extent to which they undermined and stripped away his very identity.

None of the attributes that characterised him - his modernity as a Bengali and Indian – (17). Chaudhuri remarks that the individual in question experienced a sense of being alone within their own home. They found solace in their thoughts and emotions, and their only audience was themselves. Frequently, he ponders,

What is my purpose for being in this place?" "This is not my residence (39).

Consequently, the migrants have a sense of alienation in their new environment, which significantly impacts their everyday lives and ambitions.

Ananda was unable to endure the intricacy of life in the unfamiliar territory. He struggled to adapt to the unfamiliar surroundings throughout the initial two years of his residency in London.

"He experienced a profound sense of exclusion and felt extremely distressed." (49)

Alternatively, he opted for exclusion, which bestowed significance upon his sense of insignificance and direction. The students in the college evoked feelings of fear and suspicion in him due to their fair complexions and blue eyes, as well as their tendency to easily assume things about one another.

Here, the novelist highlights the long-standing admiration of Indians for English culture and their feelings of inferiority.

Embarking on a journey to a foreign country in pursuit of an academic qualification might be seen as an endeavour to forge a fresh sense of self. However, for the majority of Indians, this desire remains unfulfilled, much like in the lives of Ananda and his roommates.

He was absent from his residence; he was disoriented and unable to find his way (57).

Therefore, the issue of identity arises in every aspect of existence.

His sense of self had been stripped away, and he had become aware of social hierarchy while living in England. (59)

Social class shaped your identity, but it did not extend to other cultures - it became imperceptible overseas. In unfamiliar locations, you were specifically targeted based on your religion and race, but not based on your social class, which was more difficult to understand than any native language.

The novelist illustrates the disparity between the English and the Indians in their lifestyles. The Indian residents, such as Mandy and the Patels, who live in the next flats below and above Anand's flat, have a preference for noisy environments. The author highlights that all disruptions associated with identity or self are inherent in every individual.

The noise originates from within your mind. (63)

Cease contemplating the matter. Indeed, that was the precise description; it was a state of being aware of one's thoughts and actions, characterised by self-awareness. While the English are depicted as individuals who appreciate silence.

The silence...highlighted the heavy and enduring closeness - of this mysterious and invincible entity, the self. (63)

He had developed a complete understanding of its continual proximity in England. He was eternally bound to his awareness. The individual desired to evade and discreetly abandon the sense of self, leaving it behind in an undisclosed location. In this manner, the settlers are perpetually encompassed by the unfamiliarity that consistently disturbs them. In addition, Chaudhury notes the distinctiveness of the English.

...the English, in contrast to the emotionally exaggerated Indians, shown a natural talent for acting; ...this group conducted themselves and communicated in everyday situations as if they were in a movie, exhibiting a distinct self-awareness as if their actions and words were being captured on film. The English did not seem to have a clear distinction between fantasy and social life (71).

Chaudhuri's critique of the English is highly incisive as he highlights their lack of sensitivity for the settlers.

The English were an enigmatic group: even if they didn't recognise your presence, they made you feel like you were being observed...(89)

Their writings extolled the merits of observation, yet they refrained from making direct eye contact with you. When sitting across from an English person, it may seem as if you are invisible because they adhere to English etiquette or cultural norms. It was not a state of being unaware or ignorant. They clandestinely practised the skill of observation.

Similarly, the English and Indians also differ in terms of their beliefs. They choose to live according to their preferences, without concern for the higher spiritual being that exists above us.

The English disregarded the celebrations, as Forster had stated, as they had never worshipped deities, only mythical creatures and supernatural beings. (118)

They lacked an understanding of the significance of having deities protecting and guiding them; they were unsure of how to properly interact with divine beings. The distinction between the physical and psychic realms of the East and West is evident, and it is unlikely that they will ever merge.

The novel's narrative voice remarks that the English were formerly considered the "master race" but no longer hold that status. There is an implicit rule in this country that prohibits the criticism of alcohol consumption. The entirety of the propaganda, including the health warning issued by the surgeon general, is focused on the subject of smoking. They consistently assert that smoking is lethal. It is a falsehood. The author asserts that drinking is significantly more deadly than smoking and also can alter one's personality. In this work, Chaudhuri fearlessly reveals the true nature of the Western world that lies hidden beneath their cultural facade.

Ananda perceives the English to exhibit an assertive demeanour in public, which they label as refined conduct.

Their actions and conduct are considered authoritative and binding...Occasionally, their laughter is so intense that it feels like an aggressive disturbance to the environment. (225).

Chaudhuri says that this concept arises in Ananda's inner consciousness but is unable to be expressed. In this manner, individuals of the diaspora are compelled to suppress their hardships and internal struggles to ensure their existence.

The predicament faced by Asians and Indians in integrating with the indigenous population is well depicted in this story.

Ananda did not identify himself as 'Asian'. He was eager to oppose the categorization, yet his strong and active support for this cause could not be effectively communicated to the intended audience (113).

This demonstrates that the Indians residing overseas are fragmented within their community.

In London, there were countless shades between white and black, making the seven colours of the rainbow unnecessary. These two colours alone were diverse enough."(115)

Despite being in London for almost three decades, Radhesh saw the city as a complete contrast to his own identity - a place of solitude, lacking in connections, family, and a definite future. He would confidently declare to new acquaintances,

I am a black Englishman (115).

He persisted in wearing a three-piece suit, emulating the style of English gentlemen. This demonstrates his strong desire to integrate into the English ethnicity. When the event fails to occur, he expresses criticism by stating that "Western

civilization was entirely characterised by vanity" (116). This can be described as an individual's yearning for their sense of self.

Racism is a significant issue that the settlers must address. Ananda encounters the distressing effects of racism when an English guy derogatorily refers to him as 'Vindaloo, Vindaloo' in public. His uncle Radhesh cautions him to exercise caution on the prevalent manifestation of racism inside English society. As the settlers establish their dwelling area in the new territory, they also incur the disapproval of the indigenous inhabitants. The indigenous population see them as competitors who have arrived to seize their prospects. Consequently, the miscommunication between the indigenous population and the colonisers commences. In this tale, Khuku, Ananda's mother is frequently subjected to mistreatment by her immediate superior, Miss Watkins.

At times, Khuku becomes agitated and hurls the file towards her. These occurrences arise only due to the envy felt by the indigenous population towards the newcomers.

Chaudhuri appears to offer a method to address these concerns with Radhesh. Individuals of this nature should be disregarded and kept at a distance. According to his uncle, there exist certain malevolent entities in the cosmos, as described by Taranath the tantric, who possess limited intellect but possess immense power. These entities can increase their size by a factor of one hundred in a mere moment, exhibit extraordinary physical strength, possess the capability of flight, and also possess intelligence. (187)

It is unlikely that one would be able to outperform them in a competition of physical power, but he must remain calm and composed when confronting them. The author uses metaphorical language to illustrate the situation and highlights the various challenges that Indians may encounter when living overseas. The novelist suggests that these challenges cannot be overcome, but rather should be avoided.

Ultimately, all colonisers come to the realisation that they are in a foreign territory and come to terms with this fact. This existentialist premise guarantees their survival in the new territory. The novelist states that the majority of Indians and Pakistanis possess a profound and wise nature. The individuals have undergone numerous births, resulting in their exhaustion. They have experienced the return to reality on multiple occasions, to the point where they now consider it a given.

Chaudhuri thus demonstrates the inherent impossibility of the settlers assimilating completely into the native population. The inability to absorb is revealed through the portrayal of Ananda. Ananda hailed from a lineage originating on a recently discovered celestial body, astonishingly distant from the realm that had given rise to his biological progenitors (217).

Indeed, this is the actuality experienced by all settlers. Despite their desire to acquire a fresh identity in the unfamiliar territory, they are unable to reveal the inherent characteristics that have been with them since birth.

References

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