



# Disaporic Insights In Amit Chaudhuri's *Odysseus Abroad*

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**Abstract:** This research paper explores the multifaceted field of diasporic studies, examining its evolution, key themes, and contemporary relevance. The study investigates the concept of diaspora, tracing its transformation from a term describing specific forms of displacement to a broader social phenomenon. It delves into central themes such as identity, transnationalism, cultural hybridity, and memory. The paper conducts a literary analysis of Amit Chaudhuri's novel "Odysseus Abroad" to illustrate these concepts, focusing on transnationalism, cultural hybridity, and the roles of memory and longing in diasporic experiences. Drawing on seminal works by scholars like Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, and Avtar Brah, the research highlights the complex nature of diasporic identities and experiences. It examines how characters in the novel navigate between cultures, languages, and spaces, embodying the fluid and hybrid nature of diasporic existence. The study concludes by emphasizing the ongoing relevance of diasporic studies in understanding identity, culture, and globalization in the 21st century, while also acknowledging the limitations of focusing on specific subsets of diasporic experiences.

**Index Terms** - Amit, Diasporic, transnationalism, identity

## I. INTRODUCTION

Diasporic studies is an interdisciplinary field that examines the myriad experiences, cultures, and identities of those who are dispersed and those who have been displaced from their original homelands. This area of research encompasses various academic disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, history, and literature. The concept of diaspora, however, has evolved significantly over time. Originally, it was used to describe the Jewish exile from the Holy Land, and then it was expanded to include other groups who have been scattered across the globe due to various historical, political, and economic factors. As Robin Cohen notes: "The idea of diaspora thus being transformed from a term signifying a specific form of victimization to one signifying a form of social organization" (Cohen, 2008).

Diasporic studies typically focus on several key themes. First is identity and belonging, which explores how diasporic communities navigate complex identities that span multiple cultural contexts. There is also the idea of transnationalism, which examines the connections and networks maintained across national borders. Cultural hybridity investigates the fusion and evolution of cultural practices in diasporic contexts. Memory and nostalgia analyze the role of collective memory and longing for homeland in shaping diasporic experiences. Studying the political and social relationships between diasporic communities and both host and origin countries is also prominent in diasporic studies.

Prominent scholar Stuart Hall emphasizes the fluid nature of diasporic identities: "The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity" (Hall 1990). Diasporic studies have gained increasing importance in the globalized world, where mass migrations and transnational connections have become more relevant. It provides crucial insights into the complexities of cultural exchange, adaptation, and resistance. For example, the novel "Odysseus Abroad" by Amy Chaudhry can be examined for its diasporic aspects, from memory and nostalgia to cultural hybridity.

As Avtar Brah eloquently states: "Diasporas are contradictory places of belonging and otherness, of identification and distancing, of 'homing' and 'de-homing', of inclusion and exclusion" (Brah, 1996). This field continues to evolve, addressing contemporary issues such as digital diasporas, climate-induced displacement, and the impact of global pandemics on transnational communities. By examining these diverse experiences, diasporic studies contributes to our understanding of identity, culture, and globalization in the 21st century.

A short Literature review shows The field of diasporic studies has seen significant contributions from numerous scholars across various disciplines. Seminal works such as William Safran's "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return" (1991) laid the groundwork for understanding the complexities of diasporic experiences. Robin Cohen's "Global Diasporas: An Introduction" (1997, updated 2008) provided a comprehensive typology of diasporas, expanding the concept beyond its traditional association with forced exile. Stuart Hall's "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990) introduced the idea of cultural identity as a 'production' always in process, particularly relevant to diasporic contexts. Avtar Brah's "Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities" (1996) explored the intersections of diaspora, border, and location in the context of contemporary migrations. James Clifford's "Diasporas" (1994) challenged static notions of diaspora, emphasizing its dynamic and hybrid nature. More recently, scholars like Khachig Tölölyan, in works such as "Diaspora Studies: Past, Present and Promise" (2012), have examined the evolution of the field itself. These works, among others, have shaped our understanding of diaspora as a complex phenomenon encompassing issues of identity, transnationalism, cultural hybridity, and globalization.

## II. TRANSNATIONALISM

The concept to be first analyzed is transnationalism in Amit Chaudhuri's novel *Odysseus Abroad*. This novel offers a rich terrain for exploring the concept of transnationalism, a key theme in diasporic studies. Set in 1985 London, the novel follows Ananda, a young Indian student pursuing studies in English literature, and his uncle Radhesh. Through their experiences, Chaudhuri illustrates the complexities of transnational identities and the interconnected web of connections that span across national borders. Before delving into the novel, it's crucial to understand transnationalism. Steven Vertovec defines it as: "The 'multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states'" (Vertovec, 1999). This definition underscores the fluid nature of identity and belonging in an interconnected world.

Ananda's identity in *Odysseus Abroad* embodies the transnational experience. As an Indian student in London, he constantly negotiates between his Indian heritage and his present life in Britain. This negotiation is not binary but a complex interplay of cultural references, memories, and daily experiences. For instance, Ananda's thoughts often drift between Calcutta and London, creating a mental landscape that transcends geographical boundaries. As Chaudhuri writes: "He was in two places at once: here, and in Calcutta; in the present, and in the past" (115).

This simultaneous existence in multiple spaces is a hallmark of transnationalism, reflecting what Homi Bhabha terms as the "in-between" spaces of cultural identity:

These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal - that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (Bhabha, 1994).

The relationship between Ananda and Uncle Radhesh further illustrates the transnational networks that diasporic individuals maintain. Despite living in London, they remain deeply connected to India through memories, cultural practices, and family ties. Their conversations often revolve around shared references. Their portrayal aligns with Arjun Appadurai's concept of *ethnoscapes*, which he defines as: "The landscape of

persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guestworkers and other moving groups and persons" (Appadurai 1990).

These characters populate this ethnoscape, constantly shifting between cultural frameworks and geographical imaginations. Language plays a crucial role in Chaudhuri's exploration of transnationalism. Ananda's study of English literature at a British university, combined with his use of Bengali with his uncle, highlights the linguistic dexterity required of a transnational individual. This aligns with Suresh Canagarajah's observation about multilingual speakers: "The ability of multilingual speakers to shuttle between languages, treating the diverse languages that form their repertoire as an integrated system" (Canagarajah, 2011).

While Chaudhuri's portrayal of transnationalism is nuanced and insightful, it's important to note that the novel primarily focuses on a specific subset of transnational experiences. This limitation raises questions about the broader applicability of the transnational experience depicted in the novel. Nevertheless, "Odysseus Abroad" offers a profound understanding of transnationalism as it weaves together themes of identity, belonging, and memory. As Vertovec states in a later work:

A condition in which, despite great distances and notwithstanding the presence of international borders (and all the laws, regulations and national narratives they represent), certain kinds of relationships have been globally intensified and now take place paradoxically in a planet-spanning yet common arena of activity (Vertovec, 2009).

Through these characters' journeys, both physical and emotional, Chaudhuri invites readers to contemplate the intricate web of connections that define our globalized world and the individuals who navigate it.

### III. HYBRIDITY

*Odysseus Abroad* is highly representative of cultural hybridity. As Homi Bhabha has pointed out in his postcolonial studies, there exists a "third space": "The 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom" (Bhabha, 1990).

This concept of the third space is particularly relevant to Chaudhuri's portrayal of his characters. Ananda, who embodies cultural hybridity in many ways, is an Indian student navigating between his Indian heritage and immersion in British culture. He has interests and literary tastes which span both Indian and English traditions. For instance, Ananda's admiration for Baudelaire juxtaposes with his knowledge of Bengali literature, creating a unique cultural perspective. As Chaudhuri writes: "He'd begun to see Baudelaire everywhere in Calcutta" (Chaudhuri 80.) This blending of cultural references exemplifies what Salman Rushdie terms "stereoscopic vision": "Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools" (Rushdie, 1991).

Linguistic hybridity plays a crucial role in Chaudhuri's exploration of cultural hybridity. Ananda's proficiency in English, his study of English literature, and his use of Bengali with his uncle demonstrate a linguistic dexterity characteristic of hybrid identities. The novel integrates Bengali words and phrases into the English narrative, creating a text that itself becomes a hybrid space. Another aspect of Chaudhuri is use of food as a powerful metaphor for cultural hybridity. The characters' culinary experiences in London, which range from Indian home cooking to British pub fare, represent the blending and negotiation of cultures. As anthropologist Arjun Appadurai notes: "Food can be a way of making sense of a new place, a new culture, and a new identity" (Appadurai, 1988). The meals and cooking processes serve not just as cultural markers but as sites of hybridity and identity formation.

Another concept is spatial hybridity, where London itself becomes a space of hybridity. Chaudhuri's London is not just the capital of Britain, but a postcolonial metropolis where various cultures intersect and transform each other. This portrayal aligns with Edward Soja's concept of the "thirdspace": "A fully lived space, a simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual locus of structured individuality and collective experience and agency" (Soja, 1996). While Chaudhuri's portrayal of cultural hybridity is nuanced and multifaceted, one should note that it primarily focuses on specific subsets of hybrid experiences - those of educated, middle-class Indians in Britain. These limitations raise questions about the broader applicability of the hybrid experiences depicted in the novel. While the novel celebrates hybridity, it's crucial to consider



Gayatri Spivak's caution against the uncritical celebration of hybridity: "The hyphen joining and separating nation and state is being displaced by globalization. The resulting cultural politics of hybridity easily lead to a celebration of transnationality" (Spivak, 2000). Nevertheless, "Odysseus Abroad" offers a valuable contribution to the understanding of cultural hybridity. It weaves together themes of identity, language, food, and space. As Stuart Hall describes the nature of cultural identity in the diaspora:

Cultural identity... is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation" (Hall, 1990).

Chaudhuri certainly invites readers to contemplate the intricate process of cultural hybridity that defines our globalized world and the individuals who navigate it as his characters.

#### IV. Memory and Longing in *Odysseus Abroad*

The last concept to be examined is memory and longing, and this offers a poignant exploration of memory and longing, themes central to the diasporic experience. Svetlana Boym's work on nostalgia provides a useful distinction: "Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship" (Boym, 2001). This concept of nostalgia, both as longing for the past and a reimagining of it, is crucial to understanding Chaudhuri's portrayal of memory and longing.

In Chaudhuri's approach, memory serves as a crucial tool for identity formation and maintenance. Ananda and Radhesh frequently recall their lives in Calcutta, using memories as anchors for their identities in the unfamiliar landscape of London. As Stuart Hall notes:

Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation (Hall, 1990).

Chaudhuri illustrates this process of identity construction through memory in passages where characters are simultaneously in two places at once. The novel presents a constant dialectic between home (Calcutta) and abroad (London), with memory serving as the bridge between these two spaces. This concept aligns with Avtar Brah's concept of "homing desire": "The concept of diaspora offers a critique of discourses of fixed origins, while taking account of a homing desire which is not the same thing as desire for a 'homeland'" (Brah, 1996).

Chaudhuri's characters embody this homing desire not through a literal return to India, but through constant mental journeys back to Calcutta, facilitated by memory and sensory triggers. Sensory details, particularly food, serve as powerful mnemonic devices in the novel. Chaudhuri complicates the sentiment of longing by showing how it is intertwined with ambivalence and even a desire for escape. This complex relationship with the homeland is eloquently described by Salman Rushdie:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost" (Rushdie, 1991).

In the novel, recollection of the past is a creative force that shapes the characters' present experiences. As Maurice Halbwachs notes, "The past is not preserved but is reconstructed on the basis of the present" (Halbwachs, 1992). While Chaudhuri's exploration of memory and longing is nuanced and evocative, it's important to note that the novel primarily focuses on a specific subset of diasporic experience - that of educated, middle-class Indians in Britain. This limitation raises questions about the broader applicability of the memory and longing dynamics depicted in the novel. It's crucial to consider James Clifford's caution against overly romanticizing these sentiments: "Diasporic consciousness is thus constituted both negatively and positively. It is constituted negatively by experiences of discrimination and exclusion. It is constituted positively by identification with world-historical cultural/political forces" (Clifford, 1994). Nevertheless, "Odysseus Abroad" offers a valuable contribution to understanding memory and longing in the diaspora. Chaudhuri

creates a narrative that not only resonates with diasporic experience but also highlights its intricacies and contradictions. Through the characters' physical and mental journeys, the novel illuminates the complex role of memory and longing in shaping diasporic identities and experiences.

## V. Conclusion

In conclusion, this exploration of diasporic studies through the lens of Amit Chaudhuri's *Odysseus Abroad* underscores the complex, multifaceted nature of diasporic experiences in our increasingly globalized world. The novel serves as a rich text for examining key concepts in diasporic studies, including transnationalism, cultural hybridity, and the roles of memory and longing.

Through our analysis, we've seen how Chaudhuri's characters embody the transnational experience, existing simultaneously in multiple cultural and geographical spaces. The novel illustrates the formation of hybrid identities, where characters navigate between different cultural traditions, languages, and social norms. Furthermore, the exploration of memory and longing in the text reveals how these elements are integral to the diasporic experience, serving as both a link to the homeland and a tool for identity construction in new environments. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of this study. While the novel provides valuable insights, it primarily focuses on a specific subset of diasporic experiences - those of educated, middle-class Indians in Britain. This narrow focus raises questions about the broader applicability of the experiences depicted and underscores the need for more diverse representations in diasporic literature and studies.

Further into the 21st century, the field of diasporic studies continues to evolve, addressing contemporary issues such as digital diasporas, climate-induced displacement, and the impact of global pandemics on transnational communities. Future research should aim to broaden the scope of diasporic studies, incorporating a wider range of experiences and perspectives. Ultimately, this study reinforces the enduring relevance of diasporic studies in our understanding of identity, culture, and globalization. By examining these diverse experiences, we gain crucial insights into the complexities of cultural exchange, adaptation, and resistance in our interconnected world. As diasporic communities continue to shape and be shaped by global dynamics, the field of diasporic studies will undoubtedly remain a vital area of academic inquiry, offering valuable perspectives on our increasingly mobile and interconnected global society.

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