

**POTRAYAL OF CULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN INDIAN FICTION:
WITH REFERENCE TO AMIT CHAUDHURI'S "Odysseus Abroad"**

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ABSTRACT:

Culture as an element is fixed to the development of a nation's identity. Indian culture reflects the lives of the Indian society, the distinctive customs, have all been accorded to the changes that have come across due to the socio-cultural effects of globalization. The local cultures, the family lives, the languages, customs and so many of the cultural elements have undergone various shifts and alterations. The Indian culture has always been discussed for the value it gives to the human relationships and customs. The study of cultural spaces in the novels of AmitChaudhuri's subsumes both spaces inhabited by the characters and the ways in which they think, feel, respond and articulate. This study of AmitChaudhuri's writing has a title which is likely to evoke and generate both curiosity and controversy. Thisarticle focuses on the representation and the significance of cultural spaces in "Odysseus Abroad". It seeks to demonstrate, analyses and explore the meaning and value of cultural spaces which in turn enhance and expand the thematic foci of the novels. These spaces also serve as a key to understand the author's thematic concerns, his vision of life, leading to comprehensive understanding of author's work and its proper appreciation. In Chaudhuri's writing, culture figures as a dominate trope informing the entire narrative in terms of both contexts and concerns.

1. INTRODUCTION:

India as a land of culture is the amalgam of an excess of customs, rituals, festivities, religious beliefs, behaviors, and various other characteristics pertaining to some particular society or a group. It is encompassed by the social elements such as language, customs, values, norms,

mores, rules, tools, technologies, products, organizations, and institutions. The Indian culture as a reflection of the Indian society has been defined as the unique one in the globe.

An amalgamation of the elements of spirituality and materialism, the Indian culture is even in the contemporary society is a critical factor too. The richness of the Indian culture can be traced back to the ancient period and can be accorded that it is still an internal reflection of the rich heritage. The emergence of the new-age ideologies and developments has resulted in the modification of the Indian culture, which has become a contemporary culture of India. In today's world, culture is not just the simple representation of aspects such as the traditions and the festivities but is the reflection of diversity. The interactive medium between two different worlds allows the coexistence of the rural and the urban, and spirituality and modernity:

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. (Dhawan 165)

The strength of the Indian culture has often resulted in the misinterpretation of the country to be a land of poverty and deprived population. But the contemporary understanding of the aspect of Indian culture has caused the growth of the society. Culture has become an increasing influence not only in the internal perspective but also in the global perspective. The modern India, different from the ancient India has adapted itself to be accepting the Western notions and ideologies. The studies often reveal the nation to be inclined towards two middle-ground philosophies. The third world nature of the nation has often limited its place in the global theatre.

2. CULTURAL STUDIES IN ENGLISH FICTION:

Socio-cultural studies concentrate on how the society and its culture influence the everyday life of human beings. In the words of Aristotle, Man is described as a social animal. However, in the 20th century, man is a short extract as the social and political animal. Society is a crowd of interacting people who live in specific geographic areas and are organized compliantly while sharing a common culture. Society is termed as a social group but culture is the society's system consisting of common heritage (Kumar and Satyanarayana 9).

Literature acts as a mirror that reveals society and depicts particular place and time. India with the excruciating traumas and experiences of colonization is a nation of unquestioned practices and unsuspecting faiths. Man as a social animal, forms society and becomes a cultured human being by obeying certain rules developed by it.

Indian English Fiction has witnessed economic, political and socio-cultural changes from the beginning to the present. The formation of Indian English Novels has been slow compared to the drama and poetry (Naik 83). Earlier in the 19th century, Indian English Literature had highlighted romance, tales, and fables, but the novels are now the gift of the west. Following independence in India, Indian novelists like Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and others have written novels that deal with the caste system and miserable dilemma of the untouchables in the society of India. Hence, India is undergoing an absurd cultural transformation while reformatting itself from a homogeneous culture to a mixed one. English literature studies of India project the evils of the society so that the society may understand its mistakes and

makes amendment too. The English novelists of India have shown deep concern regarding these challenges and have involved with the social issues of gender and caste discriminations that have marked their writings. Some of the brilliant writers of the last decade have portrayed many social ills. For instance, Mulk Raj Anand and his narratives like *Untouchable* created a revolution against the tradition and culture.

The socio-cultural evils like purdah, casteism, poverty, exploitation, child marriage, cultural conflicts, disparity, romantic tales, historical happenings, and realism are the common themes of the novels written in this epoch. However, the social evil like untouchability can be marked as a prominent one. A novel should have a social purpose. It must present a society's point of view considering the Indian society as the oldest society. It presents its traditions and customs. The writers wrote with confidence and a new passion while blending the phenomenal situation and social aspects in their literary works.

In the postmodern period, Indian literature is one of the important aspects to explore every one of its angles like tradition, nature, legends, culture, superstitions and geography. Amit Chaudhuri's novels speak about various aspects of tradition and culture of India. Thus, in the portrayal of tradition, and culture in the society, Chaudhuri's novels give another point of view on the Western and the Indian home life. His uniqueness as an author, in any case, is that he has never given up the spirit of Indianess in his writings.

3. CULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN "ODYSSEUS ABROAD"

Amit Chaudhuri's *Odysseus Abroad* in an immediate look is the internal reflection of the diasporic disparities of individuals caught between the nostalgic expectations and the need to survive surpassingly in an alien land. The novel and the consciousness of the characters reveal the cultural struggles that take over the mind of an individual in the event of being displaced. From the initial parts of the novel itself, the writer has cultivated the thought that the protagonist of the story is attentive between the two distinct cultures that have become an intrinsic part of his life.

The cultures, Indian and British contrive towards the mixed emotions within the protagonist emulating a juxtaposed feeling of belongingness and loneliness. *Odysseus Abroad* is Amit Chaudhuri's sixth novel; the protagonist of the novel is Ananda. The story of the novel revolves around Ananda and his uncle Radhesh. This novel leads the reader through British and Indian culture by considering class, literature, politics, money and food. Though he lives in London, he loves Indian Classical music and prefers to wear kurta and pajamas.

Ananda's neighbour plays rap songs throughout the night which apparently disturb him. His Walia's studio flat is situated in a cosmopolitan neighbourhood of Gujarati's, Bengali's and the English. The author shows his disregard for rap music through Ananda. Ananda is completely annoyed and perplexed with this rap music. The continuous and rhythmic words flow with haste that has have soul and he feels an unnatural harmony with severe body movement while singing the rap song:

The dull pulse-like beat started at eleven o'clock at night. It was a new kind of music called 'rap'. It baffled Ananda even more than disco. He had puzzled over why people would want to listen and even move their bodies to an angry, insistent onrush of words- words that rhymed, apparently, but had no echo or afterlife. (*Odysseus Abroad* 9)

The author interprets the distinct behaviour of the English people, the culture of the British examined to be strange which has been followed by the society. They behold ones presence with the keen attention but they seem to avoid their existence. This nature of mannerism by the people is meant to be their politeness or their regulation.

Chaudhuri distinguishes the mannerism of the English with the Indians, Radhesh, Ananda's uncle often makes eye-contact which creates an impact of superior attitude. Though he had spent more than 20 years in London, Radhesh is half Indian and half Bengali as he comes from the Sylheti roots. Sylheti is a dialect; the following are some of the mispronunciation of Sylheti people 'flat' as 'fo-laot' and pickle as 'Fikol'. He is rejoicing for the Sylheti origin and Bengali tradition even though he follows British culture in other aspects.

Ananda is enhanced with cultural and racial empathy when he converses with Manish Patel. Manish Patel is a Gujarati migrant; he passes the information about India and its well doing to Ananda. The author criticises the architectural designs of British houses. The interior of the house design is planned imperfectly. The building does not have the capabilities to protect humans from the heat radiation from the sun and the architecture is enclosed in darkness:

The interiors of English houses weren't built to cope with uninterrupted, heat inducing sunshine. But odd how it conferred beauty, even on these very streets – Warren and Whitfield, Grafton Way even illuminating Charlotte Street, which otherwise seemed permanently to be in the shade. (Odysseus Abroad 102)

Food that savours the taste buds of the tongue is the prime element to elucidate the cultural differences of a particular society. The author describes the Bengali food all through the novel and compares it with the food that has been depicted in Illiad by Homer. He also says that Indian food had lost its taste and smell because of commercialisation. Ananda remembers the taste of the beef curry during his childhood days.

Racism is the main disparity that has been followed in the Western Countries. The author brings out the theory of racism that has been prolonging in the British society. Radhesh calls himself a Black Englishman. The term black can also be called Asian. Ananda's uncle has used the word 'black' often to separate him from the Bengali tradition. The author also stated the fact that Greeks were responsible for the European civilisation and the colour Black and White is sufficient for the racial identification:

I'm a black Englishman', he'd say proudly to fresh acquaintances. He always wore a tailored three – piece suit with a maroon silk tie nearly ensconcing his collar, and a matching handkerchief in his breast pocket. The matter of colour was a joke to him, Ananda suspected_ just as it was to the Africans. (Odysseus Abroad 115-116)

Chaudhuri explains the wavering questions that occur in the minds of the people who tend to live their life in the foreign soil and how the traditional music and literature could create an impact by healing their heart. Ananda as an Indian thinks about the purpose of being in the foreign country. He also worries about the response about the literature review.

As these questions flicker in his mind, Indian classical music and English poetry made him still from the unstoppable wavering question. He found contentment by this activity which made him to forget about the isolation and sufferings. Though he tries to understand the British culture and society, he almost feels like an outsider in the British land. He is also differentiated based on the economic situation.

The author depicts the features of the architectures in the royal British land. Ananda has found it little strange about the establishment of the floorboard. He is finally convinced about the spongy nature of the floorboard only after moving to his flat and it is an important trait about the British.

“In most constructions of Englishness, culture can be removed, leaving a strong sense of national definition behind which is where the performative repeats the pedagogical but doesn't give access to national identity” (Childs 3).

Ananda, as he lives far beyond the Indian soil, has lost the knowledge of Indian politics. But he was hopelessly addicted to politicians in India, as a layman. British politicians like Tony Ben, Mr. Thatcher, trade union leaders are represented as they are associated with the working class families. He was even well informed about the class and privileged people when he was in India.

The ignorance of the privileged people favours the British politicians. Ananda has different perceptive about the British culture and society, the ideology of combining both literature and Marxist way to interpret class. He has an inadequate knowledge in economics which made him to have a false idea that rich people had gone richer abruptly. The Olympian and the Parnassian are his important core interest but more concerned on publishing in poetry review.

Ananda differentiates Indian literature from the Western Literature. After knowing the details about the literary works of Virgil's Aeneid and Homer's Iliad, he feels that the Indian epics are superior to the Western literature by comparing with The Ramayana and The Mahabharata. He finds a great deal of cultural differences between Greek god and Indian gods. The Greek gods use their power independently with full revenge whereas there are many divine beings of Indian god and goddess who will play a peculiar version of their own existence:

What to make of these epics in comparison to the Ramayana and The Mahabharata, the latter (he was now convinced) equal to all of Shakespeare and more? They were like a Thames to the Ganges, a stream beside a river with no noticeable horizon; minor. (Odysseus Abroad 58)

The author has also stated the facts about cultural indifferences being in foreign country. In India, people are differentiated based on their religion, caste, race and also class. But in foreign countries it varies, class is one of the important factors that could create a bias between the people. Ananda has understood the fact of living in a foreign country where class creates a difference in British society and he has also dealt with the inequality of being in particular class.

Chaudhuri's protagonist, AnandaSen's consciousness and thoughts reveal the clash of the cultural mystery that the character is subjected too. Along with the portrayal of culture through the protagonist's consciousness and actions, the writer incorporates specific locations and places that reflect the Indian as well as the Western culture. Christina Zwarg (2016) rightly point out that:

Dwelling with affection on the commonplace in the lives of both characters, Chaudhuri encourages us to savour the blindness and insight that “the epic begins in the ordinary “provides an apt account of Chaudhuri's novel itself: “Art was not only about not saying everything; it was about not being able to say everything. (Zwarg 34)

The element of the clash of the disparate cultures can be understood as the internal clash existent in Ananda a reflection of Ananda's inner and outer life. A close reading of the text demonstrates the minute yet critical cultural conflicts that arise in the protagonist. Chaudhuri has used various elements, ranging from locations and spaces, to music to strengthen the inner struggle of the protagonist in the cultural senses. Ananda's view of culture stands to contradict himself and his own thoughts.

Chaudhuri continually points out the cultural struggle that the protagonist is going through, with the major one being his love towards Indian classical music and the Western poetry classes he takes in the university. The Western poetry classes and the Indian classical music are in itself a reflection of the cultural disparities within the protagonist. Amit Chaudhuri has mentioned the mistakes of the poets, their experience and misunderstandings in the novel using the character Ananda:

Ananda had been startled notice his own blurred but unmistakable likeness: 'poets are the only people to whom love is not only a crucial but an indispensable experience, which entitles them to mistake it for a universe one. Wryly, he saw the pattern he was following, in committing a similar error with his tutor; it was no surprise, actually, that Mr Davidson hadn't grasped what the poem was doing, since, of course, he was no devotee of that _indispensable experience'.(Odysseus Abroad 80-81)

The events within the text, as portrayed by Amit Chaudhuri are not the mere reflections of the protagonist's life but a journey into the inner as well as the outer conflicts of Ananda's consciousness – a reflection of the cultural conflicts. The protagonist of Chaudhuri lives the modern life, where a part of his mind is longing for the traditionalistic and Indian culture. which is evident through Ananda's love and devotion towards Indian classical music, and the kurta, pyjama he continues to use are a reminiscence of his life back in Bengal.

The text in itself is a mixture of the cultural discourse, which is highlighted using the details of the everyday life of the protagonist. The outer life of Ananda, the one he showcases to the world can be understood as being majorly influenced by the English culture. But it cannot be stated as being wholly influenced – as there are various instances within the novella that reveals it. One such instance within the text is the dislike Ananda shows towards the music genre Rap.

Culture is based on the formality which has been followed by ethnic groups. A subculture is determined by a habit that is followed within the society. Culture is a popularised because of its practices. Culture is unique to the particular people in society. Almost culture is a universal one. There are many cultures but it is suitable according to the situation, religion, country, and occupation. Societal culture is based on the society and it is according to their surroundings and religious habit:

Societal culture refers to the culture of a society as a whole whereas subculture means the culture of a specific group within the society. There are as many subcultures as there is linguistic, caste, religious, political, occupational, racial, and ethnic groups in a society. Many elements of the culture are shared by the general population. (Abraham 72)

Ananda's lack of enthusiasm to accept the music genre, which was something out of his textbook, shows the internal attachment. The character has interest towards his Indian roots as well as the inability to be completely accepting of the Western ideologies and culture. The

cultural dilemma that the protagonist often faces points out the internal conflicts of the immigrants. Although Ananda finds his life in London comfortable, he is occupied continuously by conflicting thoughts that question his identity, class, and culture.

he protagonist's parallel act of composing English poetry and the practice of Indian classical music can be understood as the character's struggle in embracing his own culture while attempting not to be an outsider in the British society and culture, although, the cultural struggle that Ananda undergoes during his time in London acts as an opportunity to bring him closer to the Western culture. Though the protagonist learns to accept the Western culture into his life, he neither loses sight of himself nor does he wander away from his Indian roots.

Ananda's beliefs and actions are portrayed as an amalgam of the Western as well as the Indian sensibilities and culture. Ananda's perception on the topic of politics act as an example for the part, that is, the thought of Indian politics was revolting to him but has a definite inclination towards the British politicians.

Though Ananda was disengaged from Indian politics, he is addicted to British politicians, Tony Ben, trade union leaders, Mrs. Thatcher. They all claim their belongingness to the working-class families. Ananda was familiar with class both as a term and concept before coming to England:

Before coming to England_ which was not so much an indication that it didn't exist in India as of the fact that the privileged people were hardly conscious of it, as they were barely conscious of history – because they didn't dream they were inhabiting it, so much did they take it for granted. History was what had happened: class was something you read about in a book. (Odysseus Abroad 12)

Ananda is often portrayed as expecting to find the life in India in the busy streets and life in London. Chaudhuri continuously focuses on shining light on the perfect need of the protagonist to be surrounded by the Indian culture, though he has been relocated to a land and culture that stands in complete difference with the traditionalists and ethnicity of the Indian culture.

AmitChaudhuri published his sixth novel, *Odysseus Abroad* in 2014. It is a literary testament of the author and brings out Chaudhuri's brilliant success in the handling of modernist technique of fiction. It is also an evidence of Chaudhuri's engagement with the issues of culture which form the staple of his creative and critical writing. Like GithaHariharan, Chaudhuri has, in this instance, undertaken the retelling of the story of Ulysses and his son Telemachus in a new avatar. Echoing both Homer's *Odyssey* and Joyce's *Ulysses*, *Odysseus Abroad* makes London its setting with the journey motif brought into focus through the stream of consciousness. It is a novel about a young man and old man, about friendship, loneliness, failure and love. It has attracted highly enthusiastic and encouraging praise from the reviewers, critics and scholars. A single summer's day in 1985 is the time frame of this engrossing novel which like James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* uses a day in the life of its characters – Ananda and his maternal uncle Radhesh, both of whom live in London.

CONCLUSION:

The main aspects of the socio-cultural studies are to identify the problems of the cultural variations in the society, and to show the life of people who suffer from the differences that

arise out of language, culture, identity, class. These principles are found in the novels of AmitChaudhuri's *Odysseus Abroad* (2014). This novel narrates the life of Ananda; Chaudhuri beautifully portrayed the difficulties in about a day in London with two Indian men. The novel shows the Indian life in foreign countries by perfect characters. The class is presented as an identity in *Odysseus Abroad*. The characters and the plot have been developed giving more importance to the social and cultural aspects. The novel hovers around a young man and an old man, their relationship, failure, love, and loneliness. It presents the Bengali culture and Indian values where the protagonist feels to go back home after discovering the beauty of his homeland.

Odysseus Abroad has portrayed the Indian life and relationship, noticeably through identity and culture in various situations. The multiple cultures and beliefs are brought to measure the tradition in the novel. The characters are contrasted to show the difference in their ideology of two generations. The motif of the writer is to make the people understand location, dislocation and relocation. Chaudhuri narrates the internal conflict between the Indian people, who are all in foreign countries. The inner and outer life of an immigrant is examined through language, culture and class in the novel.

To sum up, the novel has portrayed the cultural consciousness that reveals the present condition of the people in society. The research has retraced the position of Indian culture and how the culture is implemented in the society. Literature is represented as a medium to portray the culture and raises the thirst for culture among the people. The author has shown his characters as victims of cultural changes in the society. He has tried to awaken the consciousness of every people to words their culture.

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