Chapter-8

Odysseus Abroad

Amit Chaudhuri 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 Githa Hariharan, Chaudhuri has, in this instance, undertaken the retelling of the story of Ulysses and his son Telemachus in a new avtar. 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.

In her review of the novel, Anita Sethi offers a heartening encomium. She observes: This richly allusive novel is also a playful pastiche of Homer’s Odyssey: the dynamic between its entertaining main characters- English Literature student Ananda and his eccentric uncle Rangamama – cleverly echoes Odysseus’s relationship with his son Telemachus. It is not the novel’s plot, but its rhythmic prose, interwoven
with musical and poetical references, that most engages. (The Telegraph: Sunday: 22 Feb, 2015). The novel evokes a strong feeling of belonging juxtaposed with loneliness and exile. One can early notice the familiar and recurrent use of the quotidian ordinary details of life which go into the making of two distinct cultures – Indian and British. There is a remarkable emphasis on the sense of place and the spaces within houses, roads, shops, windows, the building of the university college, London, Rangamama’s bedsit in Belsize Park, Tandoor Mahal and references to Sylhet in East Bengal are some of the strands with which Chadhuri has woven the texture of this novel. Eating places and the variety of Indian, Sylheti and Chinese dishes constitute significant ingredients of the cultural discourse which lies at the heart of the novel.

The journey motif in the novel signifies location, dislocation and relocation, lending a specific poignance to the sense of being an exile or outsider on the protagonist’s part. Ananda Sen, a twenty-two year old pensive protagonist scarcely lives in the present moment. He is instead mulling over the past or feels apprehensive of future. Chaudhuri’s love of modernist technique is evident in this ambitious stream of consciousness narrative in which a modernist sensibility is apparent every where. The narrative is sustained not by its plot put by the flow of Ananda’s consciousness which alternates between past and future. Unsurprisingly, these patches of Ananda’s consciousness amply provide an insight not only into his inner and outer life but also lead one into the parodies of Indian culture through Indian restaurants and eateries.

Additionally, Ananda’s love and practice of the classical Indian music alongwith his bedroom wear kurta pyjama figure as favourite but familiar cultural tropes, confirming once more Chaudhuri’s preoccupation
with cultural spaces. In his odd but engaging modernist fictional triumph in *Odysseus Abroad*, Chaudhuri depicts in a montage fashion the bits and pieces which organize finally into the shape of a cultural discourse which as usual, seeks to highlight the familiar and the ordinary details in and around Ananda’s life exemplified in his solitary stay in the studio flat, his interest in the 19th and 20th century British literature, his interaction with his tutors Hilary Burton and Nestor Davidson. His meager habits of eating cause hyperacidity while his hesitation in forging sexual relations with foreign girls and women results in a kind of repressed libido that finds an outlet in his masturbation. With a middle-class Bengali sensibility he seems to have imbibed a Victorian attitude towards sex. This does not however, hint at any ingrained snobbery or prudishness in him but rather projects his wavering and hesitant albeit ambivalent attitude towards love and sex.

The narrative of *Odysseus Abroad* comprises six parts titled differently: Bloody Suitors!, Telemachus and Nestor (Manny – Loss), Eumaeus, Uncle and Nephew, Heading for town, and Ithaca. The titles of the subheads [chapters] provide an obvious hint of a literary game played out for purposes of parody and pastiche. There is a hint of explicit irony manifest in the distortion of Menelaus into Manny – Loss. The title of the last chapter Ithaca is no less overlaid with parody and irony as the protagonist fails to relocate. Ananda lives between ‘then’ (past) and ‘hereafter’ which are skillfully counterpoised against each other. The nature of his consciousness is neither straight nor smooth, it is rather intangible, complicated and paradoxical in its interface. Both past and future impinge upon his consciousness which appears to be fragmented but is essentially an organized system of thought. In other words, the seemingly disjointed bits of his consciousness prepare a smooth ground
on which one can apprehend and measure the conflict brought into life on account of the clash of multiple cultures and thought – currents.

The first section of the novel depicts Ananda getting up at nine O’clock and his slipping into the retrospective memory of a television show that made him seethe with anger at the hypocrisy of the media in making a travesty of famine in Ethiopia. Ananda walks in his room listlessly before parting the curtains and lifting the window a crack (Odysseus Abroad: 4). Significantly, Chaudhuri’s preoccupation with spaces – Ananda’s small studio flat along with its window reveals Ananda living in a cramped space with unruly and noisy tenants up and down in the same building. He is shown as an ambitious but pensive and apprehensive young man with the window as the cause of his inconvenience and apprehension: The window thus becomes a metaphor of space, facilitating both ventilation and a view of the adjoining landscape:

It is striking how with the window even marginally open heavy wooden windows he had to heave up or claw down, and which he was unused to (they made him fear for his fingers) – sounds swam into the studio flat, making him feel paradoxically at home His mind was elsewhere. (ibid)

In fact, Ananda’s tenancy in Walia’s studio flat was marked by his uneasy relationship with other residents who were a strange mix of Gujaratis, Bengalis and the English. His neighbours upstairs and downstairs in the building included Vivek Patel, his girlfriend Cynthia Roy his younger brother Shashank and Cynthia’s brother. Vivek’s father lived in Tanzania, and Vivek and Shashank both spoke with a lisp which was a hallmark of Tanzanian Gujaratis’ (Odysseus:8). Ananda felt uneasy with the noisy behavior of his neighbours who kept awake late in
the night and slept almost at the end of the night. Their life style shows their inverted personalities in a foreign cultural milieu. They practiced ‘rap’ which Ananda failed to grasp:

It was a new kind of music called ‘rap’. It baffled Ananda even more than disco. He had puzzled and 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. It was as if they were an extension of the body: never had words sounded so alarmingly physical and pure physicality lacks empathy, it’s machine like. (Odysseus Abroad: 2014:9)

This reference to ‘rap’ music along with Ananda’s love-hate relationship (reluctance and willingness overlapping) with it points to a cultural interaction on the part of immigrant Indians. Ananda is also beset with the questions of belonging and purpose of wife in a foreign soil. He is invaded by a battery of baffling questions relating to his locus standi in the present moment which simultaneously subsumes the issues of identity, class, culture and the very meaning of wife. The questions appear in his mind with an unbelievable immediacy:

What am I doing in London? And what’ll I do once I’m back in India? What do I do if I don’t get a first; will a 2:1 suffice? Of course I won’t get a first – no one does. When will the Poetry Review send me a reply? I’ve read the stuff they publish – chatty verses are the norm – and they should be struck by my anguish and music. Such thoughts occurred to him during the day but were now set aside in the interests of the following in addition to the bass beat – the movement upstairs. (Odysseus: 2014:10)
This puzzlement is a marked feature of sensitive migrants like Ananda who finds solace in practicing Indian classical music and in composing poetry in English, the exercises which relieve his contemplative mind of the melancholy caused by loneliness and his ‘dread’ of what may happen to him in future. He is also confronted with the question of class in British society and culture, while straggling with the stress and strain of being an outsider (exile) in London he begins to understand the intricate but delicate strands of British culture:

It was odd. He hadn’t believed till he moved to this flat that floorboards could be porous and that this porousness was an established feature of English conscience (ibid).

Though Ananda was disengaged from Indian politics, he was dilettantishly addicted to British politicians, Tony Ben, trade union leaders, Mrs. Thatcher and so on. They all claimed their belonging with working class families. Ananda was familiar with class both as a term and concept before coming to England. He knew 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. (p. 12) His idea of class becomes a mix of literary and Marxist ways of looking at class and British culture and society. Certainly it appeared to Ananda that, in England now, the rich had suddenly become richer – but could be wrong, he was no good at economics: his sights were set on the Olympian, the Parnassian: especially getting published in poetry review.

Next to the considerations of class, politics, money and literature was food. In his mental wandering, he recalls the taste of the old spicy
beef curry when he had visited London as a child. The global rise of capital and commerce in London had taken away even the taste of homemade Indian food that left its smell in the hallways. Even before he had journeyed to England this time, to start out as a student, he had heard that money was flowing in from North sea oil. While in London Ananda realizes that he has not enough money for a decent living as a student. FERA regulations restricted the cash to 500 dollars, so his father took the help of Ananda’s maternal uncle Radhesh who solved this problem. Chaudhuri gives an insight into the personality of Ananda’s uncle Radhesh or Rangamama in the following words:

Ananda’s uncle disbursed monthly largesse among relatives living in Shilling and Calcutta – mainly in Shillong with straggly families displaced during partition – the principal sum going to an older brother. This made Radhesh (his uncle) feel kingly and succumb to the tribulations of being a king on whom many were dependent. (Odysseus Abroad:14)

In his Journey down the memory – lane, Ananda recalls how Radhesh’s family including his older brother had dealt with him in his childhood largely with remonstrances. The family had looked down upon him ‘as a bit of a loafer and Radhesh buoyed up by the British pound was now helping them. This was in spite of the fact that he had recently been made redundant but received a handsome pension. In order to resolve the foreign exchange problem, Ananda’s father made all those payments to those remote towns in the hills. In return, Ananda’s uncle made a monthly transfer of the equivalent amount from his national Westminster account to Ananda’s account. Thus FERA was subverted but not exactly flouted
and Ananda’s low key, apparently purposeless education was made possible.

Ananda’s life in London follows not one but several trajectories. His burdens were emotional and physiological journeys. His knowledge of sex was limited to pornographic magazines and he tried his best to recover from inappropriate crushes. The physiological journeys comprised food eating in different restaurants with his uncle Radhesh. His other preoccupations included his preference for modern literature, his interest in and practice of classical Indian music, and writing English poetry and sending it to literary journals for publication. Over and above these, was his sense of loneliness which he attempts to dissipate through wandering in the city. Occasionally, he feels the pangs of homesickness, of being an exile in London. As he largely bunks his classes at UCL, he has plenty of time to contemplate the nature of belonging, of how to feel at home within a foreign city, and also within his own self.

Although Odysseus Abroad deals with the flow of Ananda’s consciousness, the present moment hardly ever comes into focus. His consciousness flows backwards and forwards, leading him either to recall his past or to a dread of the future which is almost uncertain. His mother Uma, known as Khuku in her family, had travelled to London to meet and marry his father Satish there. The journey motif as such informs the novel from the beginning through its middle to the end. The reader learns in the opening chapter about Ananda’s visits to his uncle’s dwelling, though the journey undertaken by him is smaller and shorter in magnitude to the long journeys made by his uncle, parents and himself from India to London:

Today he’d make that journey again – on the northern line. To his uncle’s house. ‘House’ in a limited sense: it was a bedsit in the basement.
But when Ananda thought of the place, it was of the house itself that he thought, 24 Belsize park, where his uncle had occupied for twenty – one years the first floor bedsit, then been moved by the council down below, when a flat in the basement fell vacant and was converted into two bedsits by the Nigerian landlord Ananda had never seen….. (Odysseus Abroad: p. 26)

Interestingly, the living spaces constitute part of the cultural baggage which immigrants like Ananda carry with them. His idea of ‘house’ is ironically juxtaposed with the cramped spaces of his uncle’s bedsit in 24 Belsize Park. The houses in Sylhet, Shillong and Culcutta run as a counterpoint to the metropolitan culture of very limited living accommodation Ananda’s uncle was renowned as a world conqueror who made his journey from Sylhet (now in Bangladesh) to Shillong where he had become a used – car salesman despite all his brilliance in school. Thereafter he made a journey to London where he joined a shipping company and settled there for good. Another maternal uncle of Ananda was Benoy who had trained as an engineer in Germany. Ananda also recounts several small but significant details of his parent’s lives, especially their marriage and stay in England. His mother a mere matriculate in the third division, found herself among cultured Bengali women who had either learnt dance and music at Shantiniketan or were from Culcutta. She realized that her husband’s future lay in her hands and her arrival in London was primarily to salvage and rescue. So she not only helped her husband Satish in becoming a successful chartered accountant but also managed to send Ananda to UCL for his higher studies for this, she had worked in India house in London only to support her husband’s studies. As Ananda recalls, she carried irreducible strength:
At five foot one and a half inches, at once a diminutive round nosed busybody and the closest he’d known to the goddesses of myth. (Odysseus Abroad:30)

Of course, Ananda was right in his recent doting upon his mother, because he had imbibed among other virtues, the interest in Indian classical music from his mother. He was dismayed by the apathy shown to classical music by his neighbours in Walia’s house in Warren Street. An extract from the novel explains this cultural amnesia: unwashed evacuated, clothed in the might’s kurta and pyjamas, he sat on the rug to sing. He was an exile in his home. The frequently expected complaints. He knew the ragas he sang were hopelessly atien to Mandy’s ear (she too slept till midday) and foreign even to the boys upstairs…. (Odysseus Abroad: 34)

For Chaudhury, music occupies a place of pride in the dispensation of culture. Like his earlier novels, this novel too offers occasional flashes in which the author’s love of music comes to the fore. Ananda is relentless in his pursuit of the classical music notwithstanding his disparate concerns. Music provides him with an unusual vigour to begin his otherwise unremarkable daily life in London with the only exceptions when he is on a wandering and eating sojourn with Radhesh, his uncle: Now Ananda made a clarion call to the day with raga Bhairav (though it was already nine thirty). He hardly let a morning pass without practicing – he was a singer in his own solitude, he was his own audience and his notes needed to sound perfect to himself. Without practicing his voice would falter (Ibid: 34)

Music and singing were an invaluable means of survival to Ananda as a student in London. He sang delicately, singing was his mode, in his
student’s life of subterfuge and anonymity. He hardly even went to lecture and only a handful of professors knew him but music was a handy mode of being battle – ready, in constant preparedness. It was a battle – this struggle to master Bhairav – almost without a cause or end. However, despite his aversion to regular classes at the UCL, Ananda was a keen student of literature, especially modern British literature and a practicing poet. His love of movement, wandering in this case, with his uncle to different eateries, Indian, Chinese, British, Pakistani and Bangladeshi (Sytheti) shows his Bengali penchant for the variety of foods. In the meantime his occasional diversions consisted of inappropriate crushes in brief encounters with Mandy and his tutor Miss Burton. Thus the opening section ‘Bloody Suitors’ referring to raucous housemates (Patels, Mandy etc.) comes to an end with Ananda’s contemplative analysis of summer in Shakespeare’s sonnet ‘shall I compare thee to a summer’s day. Summer carries different meaning in the context of India as opposed to England.

The second section of this novel bears the title ‘Telemachus and Nestor (and Manny – loss). One may easily notice the Homerian and Joycean parallel at least in the names with a comic – ironic distortion of the name Menelaus as mannyloss placed in parenthesis. While Ananda claims never to have read Odyssey nor to have understood Ulysses, a reader familiar with these works may enjoy the myriad Odyssean correspondences. This is evident in Ananda’s carefully calibrated intellectual ambitions. Ananda a Bengali youngman of delicate disposition is an aspiring poet. He is profoundly absorbed in the verse of the modern British poets, especially of Philip Larkin and does not care for almost any literary activity prior to the 19th century. In his second year, Ananda has better luck with his tutor, Nestor Davidson, a moderately known novelist, who finds his poems promising, though perhaps not as
much as his essays. Ananda is depicted as Telemachus and stewing in self-pity and suffering from acute homesickness in exile, he finds a friend in his suitably named mentor, Nestor. In Homer’s epic, Odyssey. Nestor is the king who offers sage advice and hospitality to Telemachus, when the latter comes to him in search of his missing father, Odysseus. Ananda’s life in London was confronted with disparate cultural traditions and he contemplated on art, literature, culture and civilization. To him ‘Art was not only about not saying everything it was about not being able to say everything. (Odysseus: 48)

It was due to his allegiance to Indian cultural tradition that he would not address his tutor with his first name ‘Nestor’ as most students did. He decides to stick to his cultural norms by playing due regards to his tutor. At UCL, Ananda felt excluded as he did in London:

His first two years – at university and out of it – had been painful. Firstly there was the civilization itself, with its language – a language only secondarily his – its zebra crossings, where cars slowed down and waited, pulsating, its assortment of the bags and cheese and pickle sandwiches, its dry, clipped way of speaking. He felt terribly excluded. Or chose to be excluded; it gave his drift and insignificance meaning in his own eyes. (Odysseus Abroad: 49)

This sense of being excluded was manifest in Ananda’s discomfort in making acquaintance with foreign students at UCL as they filled him nervousness and distrust because of their pink complexions and blue eyes, their American accent and so on. In addition to this realization of being the ‘other’ an exile, Ananda was vulnerable to headaches as he was plagued by hyperacidity. He was first initiated to Anglo – Saxon which presented itself as on alien and primitive tongue, signaling a further
retreat from the modern world. He wondered to think ‘how remote it was from the worldly, aerated domains of Sanskrit, Persian and Greek!’ (Odysseus p. 51)

Unsurprisingly, Ananda’s first experience of reading Renaissance literature under his tutor Dr. Hilary Burton failed to enthuse him to pursue if with either commitment or occupied interest. However, he had the opportunity to learn from Dr. Burton that ‘literature was a repository of emotion and spontaneity was only a relatively recent Promantic fiction, no more than two centuries old.’ (Odysseus, p. 53) Ananda’s literary interests lay elsewhere, for he had read the poems of contemporary British poets:

The recent English poets Ananda had read a great deal of: Larkin, Gunn, Hughes, Causley, Tomlinson. One of the reasons he’d gravitated towards this college – making the voyage out from Bombay, where the college had no separate meaning for him, unlike Oxford or Cambridge – was because Stephen Spender was here, when he applied for a place, he knew Spender had retired – only just – and, even today, this was a cause of heartbreak……. If only Spender had frequented these corridors now, Ananda wouldn’t have been so unhappy. (Odysseus Abroad: pp 54-55)

Although Ananda loved Hughes’s and Larkin’s work, he was more impressed by Spender’s appearance than his poetry. He had a yearning to learn from Spender and show him his poems, but destiny planned otherwise, depriving Ananda of Spender’s mentorship. Still, Ananda wanted to write poems and become famous, happy and successful. Medieval studies did not attract him as he thought. The past is a foreign country; but another country’s past is twice – foreign (Odysseus: P. 56). Now that he was at a cross – roads in life’s journey, already a traveler,
he had to decide the course he intended to take. For a while, he dallied with the idea of taking up the study of Greek tragedy but kept putting off the intellectual background classes. His near disbelief in tragedy stemmed from his realization that there was no tragedy in Sanskrit literature:

Sanskrit theatre with its tranquil curtain calls, where thief, courtesan, soldier, king, could smilingly take a bow, their conflicts resolved – that was a welcome antidote to the western universe, with its privileging of dark over light (Odysseus: P. 57)

Odysseus Abroad abounds in intertextual references as Ananda contemplates on the comparative analysis of the western and the Indian epics. He had been slightly familiar with Virgil’s Aeneid and Homer’s Iliad. The Odyssey he hadn’t bothered to read but he found these western grand narratives much inferior to Indian epics, confirming his rootedness in Indian cultural tradition:

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…… (Odysseus Abroad: 58).

Ananda’s consciousness strikes a familiar but vital cultural chord when he compares Greek gods with Indian deities:

The [Greek] gods were undependable, and put their powers to use in idiosyncratic ways. In this, they were superficially life the many-headed, a many-armed Hindu deities; except that, with the Hindu gods, you felt the capriciousness of their actions was linked to the transformative play of creation. In comparison, the Greek gods were merely dim – witted and vengeful. (Ibid, PP 58-59).
As a student, Ananda got on well with his tutor, Dr. Burton but neither of them understood the other. This was mainly because of the cultural divide and gender difference between them: he couldn’t crack, through her, what Englishness was; and, for her, the prickly mystery of being Indian clearly remained permanently resolved (Odysseus, P. 61). His second tutor, Rechard Bertram, informed at the end of the term that Hilary Burton had entered a coma, she was alive. Her brain was not, she was too young and Ananda could not believe it, Richard Bertram a Renaissance scholar, was a product of Oxford. This created an unspoken gulf between Bertram and Ananda for Ananda was prone to irrational literary biases. And for Ananda, despite its wars and conflicts ‘the twentieth century was the most magnificent period ever.’ (Odysseus, P.63). In his next tutor, Nestor Davidson, Ananda finds a sympathetic friend, an impartial critic and a delightful character – he shares his creative life with Nester by seeking his opinion on the poem he has composed it is not difficult to observe the shimmering world of London and of Ananda’s life crowded with angst, loneliness, failure and ambition. He receives both vigour and sustenance from his memory of his recent life in London as well of his life in India. His companionship with his eccentric uncle Radhesh consolidates the feeling of shared family. His weekly journeys from Warren Street to Belsize Park constitute the familiar routine which is orchestrated with casual visits to several streets and restaurants of London. Chaudhuri explores the urban as well psychic landscape in this novel, which forms the central concern of both his fiction and non-fiction.

Weaving back and forth in time- a characteristic of the stream of consciousness novel – Chaudhuri gradually reveals the background to the lives of Ananda and his uncle Radhesh with remarkable skill and
precision as they walk through London together circling around their respective pasts and futures and finding in one another an unspoken solace. Although Ananda frequented London streets and its eateries, he invariably suffered from a sense of uneasiness: His perceptions of London after reading Nestor’s memoir, *Time Regained* closely correspond with his uneven balance with London: could one hold even London in wonder and affection? He himself was so at odds with London. (Odysseus: P. 66)

However, the cultural gap between Ananda and his tutor Davidson (who was a Jew with Lithuanian descent from Africa) does in no way hamper their literary friendship and correspondence. It is thus obvious that literature is a significant cultural production which seeks to bring individuals and minds together in harmony through Davidson’s empathy and appreciation, Ananda is able to discover his identity as an aspiring poet who yearns to write poems like Philip Larkin.

Apart from numerous literary allusions and instances of intertextuality, *Odysseus Abroad* abounds in references to places signified by the names of streets and restaurants. Lal Qila, Diwane – eaam, McDonald’s, Heal’s constitute a subcategory of their own, while different roads such as Gover street, Warren Street, Tottenham Road, Euston Road tube station etc give a peep into the urban landscape of London. Further the grey buildings of Ananda’s college appear pretentious and Roman in style rather than a part of traditional London architecture. There are references to poets and philosophers such as Tagore and Hebert Spencer. Ananda wanders and worders in the multiracial, multicultural London where he stays as a student to materialize his ambition of being a distinguished poet.
On his way to the college or to his uncle’s dwelling, Ananda feels ‘as foreign and out of place as he had on the first day’. (Odysseus Abroad, P. 74). In fact, Ananda discovers that he has been turned into a battleground of conflicting desires, passions and ambitions, Poetry and the 20th century British literature come to be his passion but still he finds himself in a conflicting situation with his mind yearning for completeness in a self-conscious manner:

The twentieth century and its literature, from its birth in around 1910 to the present moment, is passing through him, unbelievably compressed……. so the young poet is in a state of constant inspiration. Partly this has to do with being in a condition of strange incompleteness, the twenty – two years old mind acute and wide – ranging, unable to come to terms with the body’s ever – returning sexual desire, partly it has to do with the excitement of being in the midst of modernity, and of paying homage to Larkin, to Edward Thomas and Dylan Thomas, to Eliot, to Baudelaire, to Pound, even to the poets he feels remote from, like Robert Lowell. (Odysseus Abroad: 75-76).

In fact, Ananda’s weekly visits to his ‘impossible uncle’, Radhesh account of his inclination to map both the familiar and unfamiliar spaces in London. But he never does this on a set purpose. His relationship with Radhesh is apparently fractious as both of them differ on several issues. For instance, Radhesh was eccentric and generous while Ananda claims to have a rational approach towards life. Ananda feels homesick whereas his uncle mocks him for this and so on. Here is a cryptic assessment of his uncle’s personality:
Though his uncle could not be trusted. Not only was he seldom sympathetic towards Ananda’s outpourings of homesickness, he claimed he never felt homesick. He was lying. (Odysseus Abroad: 73)

Chaudhuri has beautifully captured the nature of Ananda’s relation with his uncle, Radhesh. ‘He saw his uncle once or twice a week. They got on each other’s nerves, but had grown fond of the frisson’. (Odysseus Abroad: 89). On one such visit, Ananda contemplates the British culture and its mannerisms:

The English were a strange lot: even if they didn’t acknowledge your existence, they made you feel on display….. their looks advocated the virtues of observation – but they didn’t look at you directly. If you sat opposite an English person, you may as well not be there – that was English politeness, or the rules of the culture.

Here the protagonist’s observation of English culture comes about as a counterpoint to his characteristic Indian sensibility shaped by his cultural tradition. On the other hand, his uncle Radhesh ‘with his misshapen racial superiority, often warned him against making eye – contact with skinheads and even punks.’ Chaudhuri has deliberately superimposed a Bengali sensibility on Ananda though his uncle’s eccentric behavior is also marked by his stubborn Sylheti roots. Despite having lived in London for ever two decades, Radhesh presents a type of half – Indian half Bengali personality. Unlike Ananda, Radhesh did not suffer the pangs of exclusion but he also loved togetherness and friendship. He was Ananda’s sole friend in London and Ananda his: ‘Friend’ was right; because his uncle was capable of being neither uncle, nor father, nor brother. He mainly needed a person to have conversation
with – specifically, for someone to be present, listening and nodding, as he talked. (Ibid, p. 89).

This relationship between Ananda and Radhesh was strange as Radhesh picked up quarrel not only with him but also with his sister who was Ananda’s mother. As his (Radhesh’s) basic requirement was an avid companion, he didn’t get married, because the distractions of sex and administering a family would leave less time to talk about himself. Seeking company is a marked feature of Indian culture which lays down togetherness as the basic principle of community living. And Radhesh sought both company and quarrel because the person who congenitally seeks companionship – rather than seeking out, positions of influence or power – is also, often, a compulsive quarreler. There are hardly any terminal severances in his life, as he can’t afford them. His relationship might be defined by discord but they’re also permanent (Odysseus Abroad, p. 90)

The compulsive quarreler in Radhesh occasionally surfaced when he was with Ananda whose ‘destiny of being condemned to being in London’ often threw him back to the company of his uncle. Moreover, Ananda had once contemplated the idea of staying together with his uncle but it remained only an idea. Instead, his parents chose the studio flat in Walia’s building for his stay. This Walia was a Punjabi who owned the restaurants, Diwan-i-Khas and Diwan-i-Aam. At one of these eateries, Ananda found Sylheti bearers who pronounced ‘flat’ as ‘Fo-laat’ and pickle as ‘Fikol’. These waiter’s did not speak standard Bengali. He recalls the Sylheti descent of his parents as well as of the waiters:

When he was little, his parents had instructed him that Sylheti was not a language but a dialect …. His people if he could call these waiters
his people perhaps didn’t have an army or navy, then? But actually they did, having wrested and carved out their land in 1971. The land that, before 1947, was Ananda’s parents and theirs was now solely theirs. Still could they be entirely happy in it if they were, today, not there, but here, at the tables of Diwan-i-Khas? (Odysseus Abroad: p. 97)

This reflection on the roots, belonging, and migration conjures up a cultural space which was once inhabited by Ananda’s parents as well as by the waiters at Walia’s restaurant. Although uprooted from their native soil, the Sylheti waiters retain the vestiges of their native culture through their dialect and Bengali mannerism. Likewise, Ananda’s uncle, Radhesh takes pride in his Sylheti origin and Bengali culture though he practices a lot of English mannerisms in speech, dress and food. During his brief visit to Asian Books and video, Ananda ignored the empathetic Asian proprietor:

But he did often feel the invisible, gravitational pull of racial empathy: that the Indian, Pakistani, black, even the Chinese, could be presumed upon in a way that the white man couldn’t….. Ananda felt a strange unconscious familiarity among them – in ordinary circumstances, he wouldn’t have noticed his countrymen; but he noticed then here, reviewing them not only with recognition, but with accumulated knowledge and an emotion he hadn’t previously been aware of. (Odysseus Abroad: p. 98)

Ananda’s interactions with a Gujarati migrant, Manish Patel is a case in point as he feels both cultural and racial empathy with Manish who was evicted from Uganda by Idi Amin’s dictatorial regime, Ananda received the latest news of India from Manish and became friendly with him. Chaudhuri’s penchant for quotidian and his ability to transform the
ordinary into something extraordinary compels both attention and admiration. His observation on the interiors of English houses in relation to sunshine shows the insularity of British culture:

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)

Here Chaudhuri makes through the reference to sun and sunlight a satirical jibe at Englishness: If only they’d had more sun ! This is what they’d have been like – semi – naked, sedentary, congregated in pairs or threes. They wouldn’t have needed empire – because their souls would have been full. (Odysseus: 103)

Bengali love of food and taste spills over in many pages of this novel. The smell of tandoori makes Ananda ravenous and Chaudhuri presents the description of food along with Ananda’s rhapsodizing over it:

At the Greek takeaway on Charlotte Street he paused to look at a roating rump of meat, from which a man scraped shavings at intervals….. A small flood of saliva filled his mouth what follows thereafter is a humorous parody of food and eating as depicted in Homer’s Illiad: could these be the progeny of the food mentioned adoringly in the Illiad ? Food was usually more appetising in books, and Homer’s descriptions had galvanized Ananda’s gastric juices – just as, when he was a boy, reading, in Enid Blyton, of picnics flowing with scones, milk, sandwiches, and used to fill him with a powerful longing. (Odysseus: 107)
After allaying his hunger, Ananda proceeded on his way to Belsize Park where his uncle lived. For Ananda, the areas up north such as Golders Green and Hampstead were almost unexplored. And his uncle made that journey to Hampstead slightly melodramatic. However, Ananda invariably tried his best to keep his uncle in a pleasant mood. Both of them decided their next meeting on the phone though neither had a phone. His uncle usually sounded amused talking to Ananda – and surprised. He was capable of bickering with Ananda but he always offered a long, uncalled for justification for an opinion he had expressed last week. Still both needed each other for company, survival and solace. Rangamama almost doted on Ananda for he had given him names like ‘Nandy’ and ‘Pupu’, a thing exclusively practiced with someone very close and favourite. Both of them anticipated their next meeting and rendezvous. On board the train to Belsize park, Ananda discovered at Euston station that a Gujarati couple got in at once mercantile and spiritual – old: managing to make their progress a pilgrimage and an enterprise. Ananda’s Indian instinct disclosed their identity: they didn’t speak; they were receiving and absorbing the train’s motion – but he knew by some unspecified role of recognition that they were from Gujarat: (Odysseus Abroad: 113)

In the British socio-cultural parlance, the couple would be called ‘Asian’. But Ananda did not see himself as ‘Asian’, he had a clear identity of his own – a Bengali from India. He was Indian and believed in returning to his roots: He’d go back home someday – the deferred promise defined him. When he’d visited London in the summer of 1973 and 1979, he’d seen ‘Asians’ for the first time – a family in Belsize Park in particular, whom his parents knew from the time here before they returned. (Odysseus: 113)
Through Ananda, Chaudhuri comments on how the middle class Bengali migrants in London have internalized the British language, manners and culture. Ananda recalls: The nice Bengali bhadralok lady had a boy who was Ananda’s age – eleven. He had casual long hair which fell repeatedly on his eyebrows, and he spoke exactly as a London boy would, unobtrusively dispensing many of his. He was actually English. Speaking the language in that way translated his features, his facial muscles, into the Indian of this culture. They had run into each other during subsequent explorations in the neighborhood that summer, but never talked again. Ananda was convinced that this was an Indian boy who belonged more to Belsize park than to India…… (Odysseus Abroad: 113-114)

In London, there were two broad categories of national and cultural identity, ‘white’ and ‘black’. The term ‘Black’ was the convenient catch all phrase for those not from Europe. Western societies have become increasingly multi-racial and multi-ethnic. In his scholarly study of culture, Chris Jenks observes:

What is important here is the collective recognition of racial status characteristics, treated as natural, and their articulation in terms of the collective behavioral patterns and symbolic representations of ethnicity, real or supposed, that are treated as cultural. (Jenks: 2006:96)

This western formulation of racial and cultural stratification points to negative racial stereotypes (such as ‘black’). Chaudhuri uses the occasion to address the issues of race, ethnicity and culture in this novel. Ananda’s uncle exemplifies the racial stereotype and still called himself ‘black’. He idolized Tagore and boasted of his Bengali antecedents. Even Tagore had playfully called himself ‘black’. However, the term ‘black’
was recently replaced by another umbrella term ‘Asian’. There is a witty irony in the following excerpt about race and ethnic identity:

The Greeks, responsible for European civilization barely escaped the misnomer [black] by virtue of being lightly tanned. However, Ananda had sensed the Greeks were visible to the naked English eye from a mile off. The gradation of colour between white and black were infinite in London; you didn’t need the seven colours of rainbow here – these two were heterogeneous enough to suffice. (Odysseus Abroad: 114-15)

Dispute the shift in racial identification, Ananda’s uncle had not completely eschewed the word ‘black’. In fact, he had an agenda for race. Partly he continued using the word because he’d come to England when ‘black’ and ‘white’ were the only two camps in the country. Partly it was to distance himself from the Bengali bhadralok, who, with their pusillanimous ambitions (to become GPs or at the very least clerks in the railways), their small semi-detached houses in East London and their children in Westminster and Harrow, he saw as the very antithesis of himself – solitary, without roots, without family or clear future. Chaudhuri describes Ananda’s uncle and his cultural identity as follows:

‘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. (Odysseus Abroad: 115-116).

With his experience of living in London for 25 years, Rangamama was convinced that western civilization was all vanity. On his way to Belsize Park, Ananda glanced at the Hampstead hall which reminded him
of the Pujas. Ananda had visited Durga Puja festival in London on two crowded occasions along with his uncle and parents who were half-reluctant to encounter other Bengalis. As the English were ignorant of the Hindu gods and mythology, they largely ‘ignored he festivities, as Forster had said, they’d never had gods, only goblins and fairies. They wouldn’t know what it meant to have gods watching over you; they didn’t know what to do with them.’ (Odysseus Abroad: 118)

Both Ananda and his uncle symbolically represent the epic characters Telemachus and Ulysses. Ananda’s journey to Belsize Park each time he went there was no less of an Odyssey than his uncle’s 25 year long stay in London. Though his uncle was an alert person, his bedroom in the cramped space of the basement bedsit was a classic example of disorganized life. As Ananda recalls the sight of his uncle’s petty and unremarkable dwelling:

Ananda looked around him. The centre – table, or dining table, or maybe the work table – whatever it was – had chairs on two sides, one bearing a pile of books on shipping law….. The smallish table was covered neatly with pages from newspapers in lieu of a table cloth. There were more books on it: a familiar, creased pile of The Pan Book of Horror Stories, a half-open novel by Stephen King, a copy of the Sun…. The bed was right near to him, against the wall, not properly made but not wholly neglected either……

…….The bedsit was divided into two: this room was three quarters of it, then came the kitchenette through a doorway with no door. (Odysseus Abroad: 121)
However, Rangamama’s hospitality and his gorgeous habit of eating compensated his apparently disorganized way of life. He had a weakness for sweet things which is characteristic of Bengalis. So he took ten to eleven spoonfuls of sugar with his coffee among his several eccentricities, his staying away from regular bath was a peculiarly surprising habit:

Each day he cleaned himself piecemeal, like a cat, pouring water over his head just two or three times annually. Maybe this was a modulation on the native mode of hygiene which he’d internalised after moving to London is 1957, when having a bath used to be a seasonal fleeting occurrence. (Odysseus Abroad: 125)

In fact, water so intrinsically associated with purity and ablution in Indian culture was Rangamama’s bane. He ascribed his failure to become a director in his company to his habit of frequent visits to toilet. In his view, Aeolus, the wind had disrupted his progress. He humorously observes that heroes in Europe had no bodily functions as such – or encumbering relatives: ‘Neither Hercules nor James Bond for that matter interrupted their antics and missions because they had to visit the toilet’. (Odysseus: 128)

Thus, Rangamama feels convinced that the western heroes have been created on the pattern of a free-flowing and fabulous myth which elevates them into superhuman figures without the constraint of bodily urges. The author briefly summarises Rangamama’s Odyssey that subsumes his life’s travails, conflicts, achievements, failures and loneliness which he consciously tried to conceal beneath his boldness:
Although Ananda’s uncle had embarked on his great journeys in the forties and fifties – Sylhet to Shillong, Shillong to London and from being a school matriculate working as a part – time used car salesman in Shillong to a full – fledged chartered shipbroker who ended up as a senior manager at Philipp Bros – in spite of this, the grand journey he focused on daily was an internal one. (Odysseus: 129)

Here, Chaudhuri seems to be at the height of his skill in the successful parody of Homer’s Odyssey and Joyce’s Ulysses. The momentous journey undertaken by Ananda’s uncle related to the clearing of his bowels. His daily routine consisted of syrupy coffee, half a spoon of honey and a quarter of toast at breakfast followed by an intake of ten glasses of water. Rangamama felt both excited and pleased when he was hungry. His diet followed theory of life – to do with subsistence, staying fit and lean. While taking his meal, he would chew with infuriating slowness. Which was a frustrating sight to Ananda. So Rangamama was an eccentric figure in a peculiar way. On the contrary, his sister, Ananda’s mother, who had also lived in London for a long time preferred the English bath and would return to it occasionally in Bambay, ‘where middle – class people still possessed ornamental bath-tubs though they preferred the straightforward drenching of the shower. To Ananda, Rangamama stood as a species of hybrid culture, self invented and self-cultivated:

His uncle’s ongoing abstinence from bathing might be put down to his general laziness, his slowness, which made the smallest things he did elements in a gigantic journey, or to his unrelenting adoption of the identity of a ‘black Englishman’. (Odysseus Abroad: 125)
Among the other eccentricities of Rangamama one may easily mention his habit of painful strategy. For example, he cooked the animal liver (without washing the blood) with butter and onions and chilli powder the argued that the real strength lay in the blood and ‘one of his ambitions was to have a healthy and worryingly long life. The ambition seemed curiously at odds with his other one – of never to be born again – though there was no actual link between the two. (Odysseus Abroad: 134)

Although Ananda and his uncle were companions there were few likenesses between them except the slight slouch while walking. At 24 Belsize Park, Rangamama’s trusted neighbour was a Pakistani, Abbas, popular as Shah and had very high – level political contacts. He was not only his uncle’s neighbour, he was his principal ‘contact’ – his uncle’s chief access to the British state. If, notionally, his uncle got into trouble with the government, Abbas would ‘take care’ of problem. (Odysseus Abroad: 136)

The rest of the third section ‘Eumaeus’ recounts Rangamama’s retirement, the marriage of Ananda’s parents and their respective journeys to London and their stay there. His uncle didn’t marry and kept away from women for fear of syphilis as Ananda had twice had sex-experience with prostitutes in Appolo Bunder, he impressed upon his uncle:

Because you’ve never had sex you live in an innocent complete world – it’s possible for you to be idealistic. Once you’ve had sex, the world goes grey. (Odysseus Abroad: 141)

This idealistic, eccentric but brilliant Rangamama was called to London in 1957 by Ananda’s parents who lived in Belsize Park. They’d
arranged for him to live in the bedsit opposite. Ananda’s mother ensured the friends (Satish and Radhesh) focused on exams while she handled the universe. Surprisingly she worked at a time in London when very few women worked. She was relentless in the pursuit of her goal: supporting both the men in acquiring higher education. Besides, she was a talented cook and housekeeper who transformed even English dishes into Indian (Bengali) flavour.

Back from work at the naval department, she sometimes made bhaja mooger daal, [a typical Bengali cuisine] roasting the pulses, lastly pouring in the oil, which had just popped with cardamom and cinnamon bark. The aroma was an announcement that Radhesh must cross the hallway and join them for dinner. She and her husband introduced Radhesh to herring, which she cooked in a gravy of mashed green chillies as a substitute for ilish. It was no ilish; it had hooped bones and none of the quills embedded in the Bengali fish its taste was less dark. Yet eating herring was a minor celebration, a return to the habits of home, and they made smacking noises as they sorted the bones with their fingers. (Odysseus Abroad: 143)

Here, Chaudhuri seems to focus on the food – habits of Bengalis, who had settled in both Belsize Park and Belsize village. This contingent of Bengali men and women had come for medicine, accountancy, surgery, librarianship and law. Ananda’s mother had generated a specific Bengali ethos in the locality. They were transfixed by the typical Bengali aroma of food cooked by Ananda’s mother, and they were also intrigued by the regime and discipline she had imposed on her brother and husband. Ananda has noted: Belsize Village and Park were at once a crowded bhadralok village and an island: from which return was desirable
but not imminent. It was as if nothing mattered – not even exams – before the urgency of gossip, food and each other’s aspirations. They were audible to one another on Belsize Avenue through half – open windows….. Neither Khuku nor her husband nor Radhesh wanted to associate closely with this assortment of types…… By the time Ananda visited the area in 1973, the island had largely vanished. Belsize village remained and his uncle. (Odysseus Abroad: 143-44)

While living together with Khukhu and Satish, Rangamama was very possessive in his affection towards Khukhu. Radhesh demanded absolute fealty from his sister but he was the third – both to his friend and to his sister. This caused a void in his life:

He was alone despite the illusion of togetherness, he never really forgave her desertion – Even now, when she reappeared in London on her custodial forays into Ananda’s life, his uncle could be incredibly rude – hurtful – towards her. She was his – but her fidelities were variously dispersed, towards her husband, other members of the family, and towards Ananda of course. In that regard and in other’s Ananda and his uncle must be rivals (Odysseus Abroad: 145)

As Ananda recalls his visit to Belsize Park in 1979 along with his parents, her focuses among other things on cooking by his uncle as well as his mother. Late one morning, Ananda and Khukhu arrived at the bedsit to find that Rangamama had produced a light, turmeric and spice – based curry of marrow and shrimps. Ananda had never had this vegetable before, but he was won over by the curry’s delicacy, the fortuitous neighborliness in it of shrimp and marrow. The vestiges of Indian culture remain prominent in the life-style of Ananda’s mother who resumed cooking when she arrived at Belsize Park. She was dressed in a red
printed sari, serving up *coder jhaal*. Chaudhuri presents a graphic description of Bengali cooking:

Thick white rectangles of cod in a gravy of chilli powder, with a spattering of turmeric, slivers of onion and fingernail shavings of garlic, and specks of Kalonji that she’d brought from India.

The third section comes to an end with the details of Rangamama’s obsession with afterlife evident in his reading of Pan Book of Horror stories and Radhesh and his two workmates being made redundant by Mrs Thatcher’s regime. And the fourth section of the novel with the title ‘Uncle and Nephew’ scarcely adds much to the already thin plotline. However, we come across flashes of the rapidly changing social and cultural fabric of London: while viewing the menu – card in a London, Ananda realizes: there was a new internationalism afoot in London, and he bristled against it. (Odysseus Abroad: 162). Ananda loved English poetry whereas his uncle was a militantly enthusiastic supporter of Tagore’s poems. His uncle could become warlike about Tagore, so Ananda tried to be peaceable. While working at Philipp Bros., Rangamama felt a powerful crush on a 16 year old Portuguese girl who was the daughter of a janitress Rosa. But this phase was already over and done with. As the narrative moves back and forth in time and space in this novel, there are patches which clinch the issue of belonging among Bengalis, especially in relation to Rangamama:

Did he not feel a sense of belonging any more in this area? Though his uncle used to despise his bhadralok contemporaries in Belsize Park, they’d at least been there, earlier, to despise and avoid. They were long vanished. There people….. had gone to the best private schools and were presently either at university or starting to look for jobs. Only his uncle
had stayed on. In ‘Hampstead, rejecting the suburbs and the married life
and family that inevitably accompanied them – the Shah his interlocutor.
(Odysseus Abroad: 167)

Although Rangamama used to dislike and avoid the upwardly
mobile Bengali migrants in London, he loved Tagore’s music and poetry.
In the course of their wanderings in London, Rangamama mentioned
Keats’s house to Ananda because Ananda was reading English literature.
On his part, Ananda travels down the memory – lane to recall his reading
of Keats’s Ode to a Nightingale in school he was lost in the beauty and
grandeur of Keats’s personal life but his uncle could not help talking
about Tagore once a poet’s name come up. He quoted his father who had
died when Radhesh was three in a riding accident: He [Tagore] created
not only a great body of work but a generation. (Odysseus Abroad: 172)

He judiciously added further: when you use a poet’s name as an
adjective – say “Wordsworthian” or “Keatsian” – you mean the style he is
well known for. But when you say Rabindrik you don’t just mean
something literary, but a way of life, an ethos that shaped a generation.
Can you say that of another poet? (Ibid)

However, Ananda had an altogether different perception of Tagore
as an icon of Bengali culture and literature. This is evident from his
reflection on Tagore’s impact on Bengalis in London:

Did his uncle know that Tagore’s time was long gone? it would be
too harsh to say out loud. If, as his uncle claimed, a generation had been
minted and fashioned by the bearded one – including his parents and their
voluble neighbours in Belsize Park – then to deny him was also to cast
them into non – existence. Which, in a sense was what had happened.
Tagore was hardly remembered. And to be a Bengali in London meant being the owner of a Bangladeshi restaurant. What a joke, what a come down! (Odysseus Abroad: 173)

This reflection on Tagore’s reputation and impact outside Bengal and India reveals his weaker side of the discourse on Bengali culture and literature which almost valorize and deify Tagore. Ananda goes on to show Tagore’s reception in London: And if he was spoken of, it was with polite incomprehension or mockery. Or worse, with wide-eyes incomprehension by some Englishman who wasn’t interested in poetry but in India (Ibid)

In fact, Tagore was not the only point on which Ananda and Rangamama widely differed, they also had divergent views on several other things including homesickness or nostalgia. Chaudhuri neatly brings up a contrast between the two: He [Radhesh] never owned up to homesickness – though he’d lived in 24 Belsize Park for twenty six years now. He said he was happy; his only cause of distress his rejection of the directorship. When Ananda complained of missing home, he showed little sympathy. Yet, sometimes during a walk, he’d say: ‘More chhata pore achhe’ [There’s a covering of mass on my heart] (Odysseus Abroad: 176)

During their conversation through meals and wanderings in London, the uncle and nephew get on each other’s nerves as both of them hold opinions which clash. When Rangamama passionately boasts that Satish married her (Ananda’s mother) because of him, Ananda bluntly contradicts his uncle:
'And it’s because of her; said Ananda, ‘that you two good – for – nothings are where you are today – one a managing director and the other a would – be director with a giant – size pension. Because she worked in the naval department at Aldwych while you two ate her cooking and sat your exams. (Odysseus Abroad: 178)

Although music is not as prominently focused here as in The Immortals and other novels of Chaudhuri, there are brief but inspiring occasions when Ananda delights in singing classical ragas. On being asked by his uncle to sing a Tagore song, Ananda switches over to a classical raga, which he believes is a sure mark of his Indianess:

Ananda was humming a raga: Purvi. His uncle could not abide classical music. Not only because of its demonstrative virtuosity, which he regarded with contempt….. But also the sacred context of classical music embarrassed him. Being a Tagorean, he saw the universe in a bright humanist radiance. Any mention in songs of Hari, Radha or Ram made him flinch. That’s what the Brahmo antecedents of modern Bengal had done – turned the Bengali into a solitary voyager, with no religion and nothing but a raiment of poems, Tagore songs, and – instead of deities- novelists and poets. (Odysseus Abroad: 183)

Rangamama might be indifferent to Ananda’s career as a poet and a student, but he adored the way he sang Tagore. If he’d had his way, he’d have Ananda give up writing and every loyalty to classical music, and only perform Tagore songs. His uncle routinely said that Tagore was ‘the greatest lyric poet ever’. In his view, English poets could not match Tagore for his finesse. European poets largely didn’t exist. And no Bengali poet, whether it was his older brother or the great Jibananand Das, could avoid visiting a tone and terrain that was already Tagore’s
Ananda scoffs at this idolization as thinks that better, then, for the Bengali not to write poetry at all.

In addition to being a dogmatic propagandist for Rabindra Nath Tagore, Rangamama had other tastes which sometimes verged on eccentricity. He reveals to Ananda that he was not cut out for writing poems because he had neither time nor inclination to write poetry. Between poetry and family, Rangamama chose family. Ananda’s brief assessment of his uncle’s personality is cryptic but impressive:

The black sheep, ordered to run errands. Used car salesman. Now living in the cave in 24 Belsize Park, issuing cheques to a list of petitioners – close as well as obscure relations (relations’ relations) whom Ananda had never heard of – in corners of Bengal and Assam. The solitary, faraway pillar of a family scattered and dispersed: that’s how his uncle saw himself. (Odysseus Abroad: 190)

The fifth section titled ‘Heading for town’ comes up as an analogue of Odysseus journey. Ananda and his uncle make a sojourn of the city, mapping its contour and urban landscape through its roads, houses, buildings shops, churches and eating places Food and eateries surface as an abiding concern of the author and by extension of the Bengalis. From King’s Cross station to Pentonville road, Ananda and his uncle encounter among other things, prostitutes and beggars. Rangamama had not only a sweet tooth but also a taste for such cuisines as samosas which were available at Ambala Sweets on Euston Road. His passion for samosas makes him call it ‘tremendous’. But Ananda wasn’t passionate about samosas. As for sweets he hadn’t inherited the overpowering sweet tooth gene from his uncle or his mother. In fact, Indian sweets in England
invariably disappointed him, they had a vital ingredient missing: it might well be the ghee that lacked flavor. (Odysseus Abroad: 203)

Rangamama was highly generous and expansive in his gestures whenever he visited Ananda’s studio flat at Warren Street, he always carried some gift, particularly eatables and delicacies of his own choice when both of them moved a little beyond Euston station, they come across the sweet shop where there were neat diamond shaped steaks of barfi on the left and gulab jamun – like sweets on the right. Above another tray were Bombay halwa and Motichur laddoos. Ananda was scared lest his uncle should propose to buy some of these so he advised his uncle not to buy as the sweets were not original;

It was the tragedy of London – to eat Indian food outside of ‘curry’ and to constantly discover the unfamiliar in the familiar: dosas that looked like but didn’t taste like dosas, bhel puri that resembled bhel puri but was something else. Not that he cared for the mythology of the Laddoos. He had no idea why they were distributed jubilantly at North Indian celebrations. They were more a metaphor, a conceit, rather than a viable sweet. Their prestige had no explanation. (Odysseus Abroad: 207)

Despite Ananda’s advice against buying sweets, Rangamama had his own way as he bought laddoos, and put them in his Budgens bag. Ananda, in the mean while, was temporarily occupied with a host of things which included literary figures like Proust, Shakespeare, Ginsberg Geoffrey Hill and so on. However, he gets reconciled with his uncle’s eccentricities as well as with his own sense of loneliness, fear, failure and frustration. The sixth section of the novel with its title Ithaca signals Ananda’s return to his dwellings in Warren Street. Walia flats stood opposite to Tandoor Mahal which once again continued to remind
Ananda of the specks of Indian culture in the place of his exile. Further references to Indian cultural tradition include Rangamama’s reading of Biblutibhushan Banerjee’s (The author of Pather Panchali) novel Debojan along with other English books. On his part Ananda was not much familiar with Bengali literature, hence his uncle presumed that Ananda was almost ignorant of his native literature. In Rangamama’s opinion ‘Ananda was from a breed of a new planet, impossibly removed from the world that had formed his own parents: (Odysseus Abroad: 217)

This generation-gap substantially accounts for the cultural shifts and transitions in 1980s. ‘That old Bengal that his uncle had left behind, and which was gone forever …… (ibid) Other noteworthy details consist of Rangamama’s conversation on after life and his passionate memory of his siblings in Sylhet. Ananda too missed his mother. ‘His uncle and he felt incomplete without her’. (Odysseus Abroad: 223) Ananda also contemplates his state of being in the condition of exile to which the native English freedom comes about as a fitting counterpoint. Food items such as ‘chicken jhalrezi’ and ‘Tarka daal’ along with Bengali’s love of rice further accentuate their moorings in the Indian cultural tradition. There are stray comments on English culture: by the way, English women can be very kind – much kinder than Bengali women.’ (Odysseus Abroad: 228) To this one may add:… the English emanate unpleasantness in groups. You see a bunch of Englishmen talking loudly on the tube and you feel uncomfortable: (ibid: 228-229)

Additionally, Ananda and his uncle reveal through their uneasy conversation the cultural matrix of undivided Bengal. Rangamama spoke standard Calcutta Bangla when he disclosed a familiar feature of Bengali culture that Bengalis like to eat course by course but he had no idea why
he liked to mix things up. He had once revealed to Ananda that in undivided Bengal, the Bengali Hindus were called ‘Bengalis’, the Bengali Muslims just ‘Muslims’. When Ananda and his uncle meet another Sylheti Iqbal, his uncle gives his whereabouts in Sylhet:

‘We grew up in Sylhet town – in Puran Lane when we were small, then mostly in Lamabajar’ Being a Tagorean, he refused to answer him in the rustie tongue of his childhood, but addressed him in a slightly affected Bengali, trying (as usual) to disguise the East Bengali inflection he’d never be rid of. (Odysseus Abroad: 232-233)

It is evident from the foregoing discussion of Odysseus Abroad that it works out a parody of Homer’s Odyssey and Joyce’s Ulysses in modernist fictional framework. This novel may be said to be a triumph of sorts as it is Chaudhuri’s long – cherished dream fulfilled. With its witty irony, stream of consciousness and literary and cultural allusions it establishes the author’s ability in mapping the cultural spaces through the consciousness of two mock epic characters.