‘Fo-laat? You want fo-laat?’ Ethnolinguistic appropriation and authenticity in Bengali English diasporic literature

Giuliana Regnoli

Abstract
The present paper aims to shed light on the evolution of the concepts of ‘diaspora consciousness’ (Vertovec 1999) and identity development in the literary production concerning the genre of the Indian student diaspora. Specifically, it deals with the renegotiation of the ‘problem of ethnicity’ (Jayaram 2004) in Amit Chaudhuri’s *Odysseus Abroad* (2015) by investigating the relational affiliations occurring at the level of language authenticity and appropriation. In doing so, the paper addresses the different ways in which Ananda, the main character, portrays a delicate yet strong ‘Bengaliness’ in his recalling moods and past experiences while struggling with temporary rootlessness and nostalgia.
Key-words: Bengali identity, diaspora, ethnicity.

“’Pupu”, mone chhata pore achhe’ [...]
There’s a covering of moss on my heart.
Chaudhuri (2015: 176)

“Never say, ‘I’m leaving.’ Always,
‘I’ll be seeing you.’
“’Jachhi” bolte nei, Pupu, but *“aschhi”.*
Chaudhuri (2015: 241)

1. Introduction

Languages, in their differing local norms and dialectal variations, are dynamic complex adaptive systems operating on the cultural level. In this sense, patterns of use strongly affect how language is acquired, structured, and organised in cognition (Beckner *et al.* 2009). Post-colonial varieties of English are a great example of

ISSN 1824-3967

structural complexity at all linguistic levels for their innovative and regionally distinctive forms and uses. In such settings, language does not reflect a culture but rather stands in a metonymic relation to it (Ashcroft 2009). This makes post-colonial writing a powerful scenario of linguistic appropriation and innovation in which the colonial language stands for the colonised culture and "its very resistance to interpretation constructs a 'gap' between the writer's culture and the colonial culture" (p. 40). This metonymic gap signals and emphasises a difference from the colonial language. Thus, the post-colonial writer not only writes between languages but makes language perform this bearing across by reconstructing and recreating it. This reconstruction occurs in two ways: by introducing vernacular words in regional varieties of English – which gradually become familiar to all English speakers – and by using local variants of said varieties which distinguish them from other forms of English (Ashcroft 2009).

In the multilinguistic and culturally pluralistic context of subcontinental India, this 'gap' translates into what Kachru (1965: 332) defines as 'Indianness', a structural complexity that refers to "those formal features of IE [Indian English] which mark it distinct […] from the *Englishness* of British English, or from the *Americanness* in American English"[1]. Here, English has been in use for more than four centuries, first as the language of missionaries and early merchants, then as the language of the British colonial power and finally, after Independence in 1947, as the 'associate' official language of the Indian Union and as a second *lingua franca* in addition to Hindi (Sailaja 2009). Hence, the former colonial language has naturally developed its regional varieties and what has been defined as 'standard' or 'educated' Indian English directly cuts across these nativised, local varieties (Kachru 1986).

It comes as no surprise that this hybridity and "cross-fertilisation" (Chaudhuri 2001: xxi) constitutes the core of Indo-Anglian literary production (Harder 2010; Ciocca and Srivastava 2017) and is envisaged even more so in the transnational dimension of the diasporic experience. Here, the narrative of a country completely

[1] Indian English is an umbrella term used to describe the multiplicity of varieties of English spoken in the Indian subcontinent by speakers of varying fluency, ethnic, linguistic, and socio-cultural backgrounds (Kachru 1983).

rooted in its soil and its *bhashas*, i.e., vernacular languages, is interwoven with one of India as an 'imaginary homeland' (Rushdie 2010) and a rhetoric of exile, in which 'chutneyfied' English (Rushdie 2006) is the only possible space for identity retrieval after losing one's past history and languages (Clini 2017). The fragmentary vision of the mother country and its shards of memory compel the Indian writer "who writes from outside India [and who] tries to reflect that world, [to be] obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost" (Rushdie 2010: 11). These fractured perceptions cannot be described using the language the way the British did, hence the need to forge a hybrid new language which is a mirror of local practices and identity negotiation so as to find in that linguistic struggle "a reflection of other struggles taking place in the real world, struggles between the cultures within ourselves and the influences at work upon our societies" (Rushdie 2010: 17).

While works on the literary genre of the Indian diaspora have received wide recognition, little attention has been given to one of its subgenres: the Indian student diaspora. Student mobility bears on the diasporic experience itself, which is hardly lived as an irreparable sense of displacement, but rather clings onto its temporary effects and builds on identity development and ethnicity renegotiation (Regnoli 2019). Studying abroad for a short period, getting acquainted with the customs and traditions of the host country – in short, trying to adapt to the new environment just to leave it again after some two to five years – makes everything transient: from the diasporic experience and the condition of expatriates to the sense of rootlessness and nostalgia.

Diasporic Indo-Anglian texts are especially interesting in this respect. As Rushdie (2010: 17-18) points out:

> [t]o be an Indian writer in this society is to face, every day, problems of definition. What does it mean to be 'Indian' outside India? How can culture be preserved without becoming ossified? How should we discuss the need for change within ourselves and our community without seeming to play into the hands of our racial enemies? What are the consequences, both spiritual and practical, of refusing to make any concession to Western ideas and practices? What are the consequences of embracing those ideas and practices turning away from the ones that came here with us? These questions are all a single, existential question: How are we to live in the world?

In order to tackle these issues, the following sections will focus on and question from a critical perspective *Odysseus Abroad* (2015), a novel by Bengali author Amit Chaudhuri. In particular, discourse concerning appropriation and authenticity will be investigated from a linguistic and cultural perspective in order to assess how Chaudhuri comes to terms with the renegotiation of the 'problem of ethnicity' (Jayaram 2004) faced by Ananda, the main character.

2. Diaspora as Theory: Challenges and Prospects

The Indian Diaspora constitutes an important and, in some respects, unique force in world culture. According to the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (2018), more than 31.2 million Indians live outside India, either as people of Indian origin (PIOs), i.e., people who have acquired the citizenship of the host country, or non-resident Indians (NRIs), i.e., people living abroad on a temporary residence permit. However, this is an estimate based on the narrow definition of what constitutes the Indian Diaspora since it takes into account only people who migrated from the Republic of India. In this respect, Skutsch (2005) uses a broader definition so as to include people who migrated from the whole of the Indian subcontinent, i.e., Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Diasporas are social formations historically referring to the forced movement of Jews from Israel and broadly consisting of groups of people who spread from one original country to other parts of the world. They are sometimes referred to as transnational or expatriate communities and play a pivotal role in leveraging the benefits of migration for development (IOM Glossary of Migration 2019). The theoretical innovations of post-colonial and diaspora studies challenged the definitions of concepts such as 'culture' and 'identity' and developed new ways of thinking beyond the confines of the nation-state (Shackleton 2008). As William Safran (2007) puts it:

> [t]his phenomenon has called into question the relevance of the ideal-type of the "nation-state", or, more exactly, of the congruence of nation and state, and has created a situation where the societies of most countries are becoming multiethnic, multicultural, multiracial, and pluralistic.

While drawing attention to the inherent heterogeneity of diasporic communities, post-colonial studies have stressed the importance of "[t]he notion of diaspora in particular [as being] productive in its attention to real-life movements of peoples throughout the world, whether these migrations have been through choice or compulsion" (Shackleton 2008: ix). In describing diasporas, for instance, Roger Caratini (1986: 198-199) has used the term "centrifugal minorities". In this sense, the homeland is the centre and the host land, the periphery. A similar analogy is that of the "solar system" by Michael Bruneau (2001: 193-212), according to which the homeland is the sun and the various diasporas are part of an expanding constellation of stars formed around it.

In the attempt to refine the discussion of diaspora, Safran (2007) questions the nature of such communities to distinguish them from mere immigrants. He posits that diasporic communities share, among many others, the following characteristics: (i) they have been dispersed from an original centre to one peripheral or foreign region; (ii) they retain a collective memory about their homelands; (iii) they feel partly alienated from the host country; (iv) they regard their homeland as their true home; (v) in structuring their communities and adapting to the host countries, they finally "become themselves independent centres of cultural creation; yet their creations continue to contain certain ethno-symbols, customs, and narratives of the homeland" (2007).

More recent approaches to diasporic studies argue that the consideration of the epistemological implications of the term 'diaspora' acquires even greater significance to post-colonial studies when seen as theory (Ciocca and Srivastava 2017). In this framework, migration is considered in terms of adaptation – to transformations, changes and dislocations, and construction of new forms of knowledge and ways of seeing the world (Shackleton 2008). These "mutual transformations" (Gandhi 1988: 129-135) affect coloniser and colonised, migrants as well as indigenous populations. This has very much to do with what Vijay Mishra (1996: 422-423) defines as "diaspora imaginary", i.e., "a joy, a pleasure around which antimiscegenation narratives of homeland are constructed". Diasporic subjects do not generally break their relationship with the ancestral land. Their search for continuity and ancestral roots means that "they continue to relate personally or vicariously, to

the homeland in a way or another, and their ethnic-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship" (Safran 1991: 23). A key feature that distinguishes diasporas from individual migrants is their awareness of their origins and roots. While this is usually heightened by transnational activities (Sharma 2014) and retained in memories, food, and other artefacts of the community's cultural life (Levon 2013), it is generally also mirrored in observed linguistic practice (cf. section 4). Moreover, the concept of diaspora *as* consciousness puts great emphasis on identity negotiation and examines "a particular kind of awareness said to be generated among contemporary transnational communities" (Vertovec 1999: 285). While

> [t]here is no doubt that diaspora has to do with a condition or an identity, [...] is that enough? A mere proclamation of identity – as for example, that of an American saying "I'm Irish", "I'm Jewish", or "I'm Italian" – has little or no meaning unless it reflects a way of thinking, a feeling of being "alien", and, occasionally, patterns of behavior that tend to fall outside the norms of society at large (Safran 2007).

Friesen and Kearns (2008: 225) define transnationalism as a "set of ongoing linkages" which can either be seen as consisting of social network allegiances spanning across national borders, such as social reproduction or as a diaspora consciousness involving dual or multiple identities. By diaspora consciousness, they mean that "a person may be Bengali [or] Indian" (p. 225) depending on specific sociocultural and linguistic circumstances. By drawing on various options available to them for their identity construction, diasporic subjects perform their identity duality/multiplicity in different contexts, in which "many ethnic associations have been formed to facilitate the maintenance of a specific [...] regional culture [...]. At the same time, there is a strong imperative to establishing a pan-[...] [ethnic] identity". This calls into question what Jayaram (2004) defines as the renegotiation of the 'problem of ethnicity', which is often resolved in the willingness of the diasporic subjects to shed their regional, linguistic and ethnic identities, sometimes in deference to their more general pan-Indian one. Such renegotiation is particularly poignant with respect to discourse concerning appropriation and authenticity in Indo-Anglian diasporic literary production and acquires even greater significance in the transient

dimension of the Indian student diaspora. Here, linguistic norms tend to be more fluid and negotiable compared to stable diasporas and mirror identity duality/multiplicity.

3. The Indian Student Diaspora: Sketching a Literary Genre

In recalling Safran's (2007) approximation of an ideal-type of diasporic stable community (cf. section above), it is worth mentioning that the label of diaspora should not necessarily be limited to ethnic communities whose members have fled or have been forcibly extruded from their home countries and whose expatriation is marked by collective traumas (such as political persecution or the Partition). It may also be extended to communities that have expatriated of their own free will for economic improvement or educational purposes. If we extend the label of diaspora to the latter group, we may find the peculiar configuration of transient multilingual communities, i.e., dynamic scenarios in which people from diverse socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds come together for a short time around specific shared activities (Mortensen and Fabricius 2014).

Some speech communities exist in relation to specific social practices and activities (Lave and Wenger 1991). Because of this, members are typically aware of their role and relationship to other communities as part of normal functioning. A transient community is much like a community of practice, which is defined simultaneously by the membership of the speakers and the practice in which that membership engages. Eckert and McConnel-Ginet (1992: 490) define a community of practice as "an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in some common endeavor [and within which] ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations [...] emerge in the course of their joint activity around that endeavor". As is the case for transient communities, it is the practices of the community and the members' differentiated participation in them that structure the community socially.

In transient communities, no fixed norms apply, and this fluidity goes hand in hand with identity issues (cf. section above). As in diasporic stable communities, members are engaged in specific social practices and activities, e.g., attending lectures, discussing their projects with professors, socialising with their peers, and are aware

of their role and relationship to other communities. Unlike them, members deal with temporary alienation, nostalgia, and cultural displacement, partly relieved and partly destabilised by their return to the mother country. According to Uma Parameswaran (2003: 165), the diasporic experience coming out of the stable migrant settlement is marked by progressive phases ultimately leading the diasporic subjects to embrace their new identities.

> The first [phase] is one of nostalgia for the homeland left behind mingled with fear in a strange land. The second is a phase in which one is so busy adjusting to the new environment that there is little creative output. The third phase is the shaping of Diaspora existence by involving themselves in ethnocultural issues. The fourth is when they have 'arrived' and start participating in the larger world of politics and national issues [...]

Interestingly, members of transient communities, e.g., students, undergo a fifth phase: their return to the homeland and their subsequent and partial identity retrieval. While members of stable communities experience the previous phases over generations, those of transient ones do so in a much shorter period of time – generally, a few years.

Such a broad use of the term 'diaspora' is based on a purely physical denotation of dispersal or change of locality. Nostalgia, loss, betrayal, and duty are, at times, the foundations of these new homes as the diasporic subjects adjust to the new country. In this process, issues of acculturation and assimilation become central as diasporic subjects negotiate the unbalance of their hyphenated identities. Indeed, current perspectives on contemporary Indian literary production envisage the transnational dimension of the diasporic experience by challenging and subverting any easy celebration of the diaspora as the nomadic and post-modern condition, finally recalling that it is an uneasy place and that issues of displacement and (un)belonging are more forceful than ever (Clini 2017). Hence the 'problem of ethnicity' (Jayaram 2004) is often resolved in the willingness of the diasporic subjects to shed their regional, linguistic, and ethnic identities in deference to their more general pan-Indian one.

A substantial group of first- and second-generation writers coming from the Indian state of West Bengal and the country of Bangladesh has been particularly interested in ethnicity renegotiation

in the diaspora from the last two decades of the twentieth century. These *probashi*, i.e, diasporic, Bengalis, including second-generation American author Jhumpa Lahiri and migrant Kolkata authors Bharati Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh and Amit Chaudhuri, to name but a few, explicitly portray a delicate yet strong 'Bengaliness' in their writings by recalling themes, moods and language markers that are highly culture-specific. Hence, local food, politics and insightful discussions on philosophy, music, literature and writing itself constitute the core of their novels, poems, and essays in which Western and Eastern cultures and combined together, positioning themselves in Bhabha's (2004) third space.

The works of Amit Chaudhuri are one such example. Internationally acclaimed poet, novelist and music composer, Chaudhuri was born in Kolkata and grew up in Mumbai before experiencing the student diasporic condition himself, having studied English Literature at UCL and Oxford. Along with the late twentieth century New Delhi author Anurag Mathur, he contributed to sketching a new genre in the already prolific Indian literary production, that of the Indian student diaspora[2].

First in *Afternoon Raag* (1999), then in *Odysseus Abroad* (2015), Chaudhuri delves into the positive and negative aspects of displacement in describing the lives of Sandeep and Ananda, two young Bengali students whose loneliness and melancholy sharpen their memories of home which come back to haunt them in vivid, sensory detail. Both novels are partially autobiographical and follow two distinct trajectories: (i) the students' families and the years spent in Mumbai and Kolkata and (ii) their experiences and perceptions of student-life at Oxford, for Sandeep, and UCL, for Ananda. In both novels, Chaudhuri has captured the cultural ethos of the cities of Oxford, London, Mumbai, and Kolkata. In between these, he has deliberately introduced the world of music (in *Afternoon Raag*, the *raag* being a melodic framework of Indian classical music), literature (in *Odysseus Abroad*, spanning from Homer to Tagore to modernists) and the enchantment that both evoke. Moreover, in both novels some fine passages describe the Bengali culture, bringing both the

[2] Anurag Mathur is author of *The Inscrutable Americans* (1991), a hilarious novel describing a year spent on a small university campus in the U.S. by Madhya Pradesh student Gopal Kumar.

novelty and variety of India's cultural fabric. However, what makes them remarkable is the author's ability to visualise and evoke minute details of the daily lives of the main characters, which range from their kitchens and bedrooms to their colleges and, finally, to the cities mentioned above.

Odysseus Abroad unfolds over the course of a single warm July day in London in 1985 and follows a young BA student in English Literature in his early twenties, Ananda, as he wakes up in his rented room in Warren Street, potters around, attends a tutorial at UCL at midday and goes to see his uncle Rangamama in the older man's basement bedsit in Belsize Park. Nephew and uncle walk south for a bit, take the Tube to Ananda's, buy some Indian sweets *en route* and then go out to dinner at a curry house, after which they saunter back to Ananda's room.

Adhering closely for almost its entirety to Ananda's point of view, the novel gives him a rich and eloquent interiority. In exploring Ananda's fragmentary identities – he is a Bengali with Sylheti origins in a continuous struggle with his and his family's past and his temporary life in London – Chaudhuri borrows from different literary traditions. Indeed, the novel owns a hyphenated identity itself, and there are clues everywhere: in the title, in the chapter titles (*Telemachus and Nestor*, *Eumaeus*, *Ithaca*), in the third epigraph from Borges ("I believe our tradition is all of Western culture, and I also believe that we have a right to this tradition, greater than that which the inhabitants of one or the other Western nation might have"). The more substantial relational affiliation occurs on the level of tradition and its appropriation: the novel, in fact, may be interpreted as a conversation with Joyce and Homer, who both speak in regional varieties of South Asian English and the *bhashas*.

4. Ethnicity renegotiation: Indian Englishes and the *bhashas*

The role of language in the maintenance of diaspora sentiments is as controversial as that of language in ethnic consciousness in general. While to constructivist social scientists, who believe that ethnicity is an artificial creation and an instrumental identity, language is relatively unimportant (Cohen 1969), other scholars claim its centrality as a powerful diasporic marker along with culture (Friesen

and Kearns 2008; Sharma 2014). Although it does not guarantee its survival (if only, because languages change in contact with those of surrounding societies), the perpetuation of ethnic idioms may help minority communities survive as diasporas (Regnoli 2019).

As briefly mentioned in section 1, language is metonymic of culture in the sense that linguistic variation stands for cultural difference. This sets up the so-called 'metonymic gap', i.e., the cultural gap formed when writers transform English according to the needs of their source culture. In this sense, language is horizontal in that it offers a horizon of representation to experience – all representation intimating a 'something more' in the horizon of the statement. Within this horizon of possibilities, language can never be perfectly faithful to experience since experience itself functions in concert with, rather than prior to, language. Hence, language does not reflect but rather invents or re-presents the experience (Ashcroft 2009). In so doing, questions of appropriation and authenticity come to the fore.

In *Odysseus Abroad*, language re-presents the temporary diasporic experience of the main character on three different yet connected levels which emphasise both the close association between appropriation and authenticity and the relationship of Ananda with his physical and imaginary homelands. The first one concerns the language of the host country, British English. Ananda, a student with intense poetic ambitions (he aspires to be the next Larkin) and an extravagant impatience with any pre-modernist literature ("Ananda couldn't seriously engage (whatever pretence he made) with someone whose interests were anterior to 1800" [p. 63]) is both mesmerised by "the amazing menu of accents [of the city] [...] [and] the warmth of Tony Benn's s's" (p. 11) and intimidated by "its language – a language only secondarily his" (p. 49). As an English literature student, he feels "embarrassed" (p. 58) when

> he'd always presumed that Sophocles rhymed with 'monocles'. Until, standing before a noticeboard announcing lectures, his mispronunciation was gently overlooked by a fellow student, an English boy, who repeated the name, rhyming it with Pericles" (pp. 57-8).

This situation causes him such a sense of displacement that the narrator comments as follows: "[h]e was plainly prejudiced against

the West. Then what was he doing in the West, in the English department? He was clearly not at home. He was lost" (p. 57). However, his sense of unbelonging and displacement is temporary. Perfectly aware of his transient condition (he defines himself "a migrant student" (p. 72)), Ananda is reassured that "nothing, including Warren Street, was long-term" (p. 32) and that "[h]e'd go back home someday – the deferred promise defined him" (p. 113). In playing with the Joycean trope of the modernist exile, Chaudhuri positions Ananda's hyphenated identities on the map of modernity, highlighting the global cultural flows and, more specifically, the "ethnoscapes" (Appadurai 1996: 33) characterising his student diasporic condition. In so doing, Chaudhuri appropriates literary modernism – the exile trope, in particular – and, at the same time, he authenticates it by emphasising its temporary dimension in a world on the move, where everything is meant to be fragmentary, fleeting, transient. In this sense, Edward Said (2000: 185) may be right when he posits that "in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional".

Ananda frequently depicts his student life as one "of subterfuge and anonymity (he hardly went to lectures and only a handful of professors knew him), of being battle-ready, in constant preparedness" (p. 35) and as a "painful" (p. 49) experience. As he puts it: "[h]e felt terribly excluded. Or chose to be excluded [...] The students in the college – they filled him with nervousness and distrust because of their pink complexions and blue eyes, their easy taking for granted of each other" (p. 49).

His homesickness is "ever-returning" (p. 100). London is perceived as "a place of exile" (pp. 34; 171) in which "[t]he past is a foreign country, but another country's past is twice-foreign" (p. 56) and a dystopic and uncanny location: "[i]t was the tragedy of London – to eat Indian food outside of the 'curry' and to constantly discover the unfamiliar in the familiar: dosas that looked like but didn't taste like dosas, bhelpuri that resembled bhelpuri but was something else" (p. 207). Curry places and Gujarati and Pakistani shops are his London Ithaca ("Thank goodness for immigrants!" (p.103)). Here:

> 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. The outlines of their consciousness were fuzzier, less individual, and softer, like their physical features – noses, jawlines, bodies. Ananda felt a strange unconscious familiarity among them – in ordinary circumstances, he wouldn't have noticed his countrymen; but he noticed them here, reviewing them not only with recognition, but with accumulated knowledge and an emotion he hadn't previously been aware of (p. 98).

One of the main features of diaspora is the existence of a pan-ethnic solidarity, marked by links between co-ethnics across various host lands (Safran 2007). Panethnicity generally allows such groups to unite based on similar historical relations or social conditions, thus creating a strong sense of empathy which, at times, evolves into close-knit network allegiances and affiliations. Ananda, for instance, is sympathetic to Pakistani and Chinese immigrants: "the stubborn conflicts – between Indian and Chinese, Pakistani and Indian – melted and became irrelevant" (p. 99).

Curry places are Ananda's safe territory in which varieties of South Asian English, Bangla, Bangladeshi and Sylheti are constantly mixed[3]. Bengali English, Bangladeshi English and Sylheti English constitute the second level according to which the diasporic experience of the main character is re-presented. These regional varieties are strong diasporic and identity markers which bring temporary relief in Ananda's student-life in London. Entering the Gurkha Tandoori restaurant with his uncle Rangamama, Ananda is captured by the waiter's strong and relatable Sylheti accent and is immediately brought back to an imaginary homeland:

a waiter greeted them with a 'Table for two?' in a Sylheti accent. Careless with the 'b', pushing table close to te-vul. Ananda felt he was near home. Not home in Bombay: his parents didn't speak Sylheti in that large-hearted peasant way [....] Not Warren Street of course. Not Sylhet, either – he'd never been there [...] Maybe some notion of Sylhet imparted to him inadvertently by his parents and relations (p. 225).

Similarly, Tanzanian Gujarati English sounds "guileless and reassuring" (p. 8) in his neighbour's "soft way of saying his t's that was both limpid and menacing" (p. 7). Often, switching to Bengali

[3] Sylheti is a language spoken in the Sylhet division of Bangladesh.

English is deliberate, meant to put Ananda at ease and "earn trust in a way that English or standard Bengali couldn't" (p. 96). As in, for instance, when he arrived in London for the first time two years earlier with his parents and was looking for a place to stay and a Bengali waiter asked him "Fo-laat [...] 'You want Fo-laat?'" (p. 96). Ananda was delighted by the neologism and by the deepest ("maybe [...] slightly too deep" (p. 97)) familiarity of the waiter.

Nothing, however, reassures him more than conversing in Bengali, Bangladeshi Bengali, and Sylheti. Through them, Chaudhuri delves into the third level of language re-presentation of Ananda's migrant experience, which is irremediably linked to his uncle Rangamama, his "sole friend in London" (p. 89), in his fifties, unmarried (a virgin, even), wealthy, simultaneously generous and parsimonious, supporting a network of relatives in India with the sizeable pension from his early retirement. Rangamama proudly considers himself "a black Englishman" (p. 115) although "Indians had then only just emerged into this new identity – 'Asian' – from having not long ago been 'black'" (p. 114)[4]. Fond of Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, who enrolled in the same college as Ananda in 1879 to read Law, Rangamama defines himself as black partly because he came to England when 'black' and 'white' were the only two camps of the country and partly because of his wish to distance himself from the Bengali *bhadralok*, i.e., gentlemen, living in London[5]. Yet, it is with him and through him that Ananda returns to his – at times, imaginary – homelands: Kolkata, Mumbai, and Sylhet. Rangamama was born in Sylhet and had spent his entire childhood there before Independence and Partition occurred and he decided to move to London.

Nephew and uncle very seldom communicate in Bangladeshi Bengali or Sylheti, opting for "standard Bengali" (p. 97) for different reasons. As far as Rangamama is concerned, he tends to

[4] The term 'Black Englishman' or 'Black British' developed in the 1950s to refer to Indian, West Indian, and African people from the former British colonies who were residents of the United Kingdom. The term has historically had a number of applications as a racial and political label and is one of the various self-designation entries used in official UK ethnicity classifications. (Bhopal 2004).

[5] *Bhadralok* is a Bengali term "widespread since the nineteenth century, which roughly denotates an educated, decent-behaved member of the higher ranks of Bengali (and especially Calcutta) society" (Harder 2010: 351).

distance himself from Bengalis and, whenever some Sylheti waiter enquires him with a *Kemon asen?*, i.e., how are you? in Bangladeshi Bengali, or asks him about his origins, "being a Tagorean, he refused to answer him in the rustic 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" (pp. 232-33). Similarly, Ananda would never reply with "the rustic 'Bhala', fearing it might sound like a parody of the tongue" (p. 97) but rather with "'Bhalo' – standard Bengali" (p. 97). This happens mainly because when he was a child his parents had instructed him that Sylheti was a dialect, and not a language. In such occasions, McLuhan's aphorism, "a language is a dialect with an army and a navy", comes to his mind, letting him meditate on the fact that, "his people" (p. 97) actually had an army and a navy, having wrested and carved out their land in 1971, the very same land that, before 1947, was both Ananda's parents and theirs and was now solely theirs. A deep sense of nostalgia for Sylhet, his imaginary homeland, and of rootlessness is embodied in Ananda's sympathy for Bangladeshi Bengali and Sylheti which "made everybody in his family laugh with joy" (p. 225).

Yet, the renegotiation of the 'problem of ethnicity' (Jayaram 2004) is resolved differently by uncle and nephew. Rangamama is assimilated in the host country and has acquired a more general pan-Indian identity over the years. He, in fact, represents the prototypical member of diasporic stable communities, who tend to move away from co-ethnics gradually and embrace their fully-fledged pan-ethnic identities. This social behaviour is generally mirrored in specific language practices. Rangamama's deliberate use of Bengali, or, more precisely, Kolkata Bengali, marks his distance from the Bangladeshi and Sylheti communities of London (cf. above). This becomes particularly poignant in relation to appropriation and authenticity since it points to both the indexical and pragmatic force of language and to metalinguistic awareness. By consciously preferring specific languages over others, Rangamama asserts his identity and his in-group versus out-group belonging. The transient situation of Ananda, on the other hand, exhorts him to question his identity or, better still

> [...] the stripping of his identity itself. None of the things that defined him – that he was a modern Bengali and Indian, with a cursory but proud

knowledge of Bengali literature; that he wrote in English, and had spoken it much of his life [...] almost none of this counted for anything in London [...]. In this way, his identity had been taken away from him (pp. 17-18).

In order to recover, at least partially, his fragmentary identity, Ananda seeks temporary refuge in his imaginary homeland in London, inhabited by Bengali *bhadralok*, Bangladeshis, Sylhetis and immigrants of all sort, thus marking his affiliation and kinship with them using Bangla. In so doing, he resolves the 'problem of ethnicity' (Jayaram 2004) by shedding his regional, linguistic and ethnic identities in deference to his more general pan-Indian one according to specific sociocultural circumstances, which are, in turn, mirrored in the three language levels discussed above. Here, language does not reflect but rather invents or re-presents the diasporic experience by both appropriating and authenticating British English, South Asian varieties of English and the *bhashas* to mark proximity and network allegiance with co-ethnics.

5. Conclusions

In the attempt to question appropriation and authenticity, Chaudhuri (2001: xxix) urges postmodern times to quest for difference and hybridity. He dismantles the illusion of authenticity attached to Indian vernacular writings and posits that Bengali and English share a similar degree of inauthenticity. In doing so, Chaudhuri (2006) conversely authenticates Indian writing in English (Harder 2010). In this sense, appropriation and authenticity are two sides of the same coin, one metonymic of the other, as is the language of culture.

In as much as linguistic variation stands for cultural difference, authenticity and appropriation go hand in hand in Chaudhuri's *Odysseus Abroad*, which may be framed as a conversation on exile with Homer and Joyce in regional varieties of South Asian English and the *bhashas*. This conversation, however, is embedded in the modern transient configuration of the diaspora. By paying tribute to the modern exilic predicament of Indian students who decide to leave their mother country for educational purposes, Chaudhuri sheds light on one of the more unexplored forms of diaspora by interpreting students' common moods and experiences through

Ananda's struggle with rootlessness and nostalgia[6]. Yet, if diaspora means exile as an existential condition, Chaudhuri builds on it and subverts the very same category by highlighting its temporary character and effects through language. In doing so, he re-presents Ananda's migrant experience on three different levels, each connected to a specific language or variety of language: (i) the variety of the host country, i.e., British English; (ii) the regional varieties of the mother countries, i.e., Bengali English, Bangladeshi English and Sylheti English and, finally, (iii) the *bhashas* of the mother countries, i.e., Bangla, Bangladeshi Bengali and Sylheti. All three levels shed light on how the main character struggles to resolve the 'problem of ethnicity' (Jayaram 2004). While (i) refers to the constant homesickness of Ananda, who perceives London as nothing but a place of exile, (ii) and (iii) stand for his 'Ithacas' in London and symbolise the importance of the transnational dimension for the diasporic subjects. Curry places, Indian shops, and restaurants, along with Ananda's uncle Rangamama, are, in short, his imaginary homelands as well as the core features of his migrant experience since they mark the significance of pan-ethnic solidarity.

Through language, Chaudhuri portrays both benefits and compromises of living as transient and stable migrants as well as the opportunity to experience diverse cultural modes. Living in a foreign country enables Rangamama to integrate into the local community and, thus, to face his dual-identity dilemma. Conversely, such ambivalence produces existential anguish in the psychology of Ananda, who does not seem to face homesickness and nostalgia until he goes back home?. The quest of *probashi* Bengali students for cultural distinctiveness marks the relation between language and identity and emphasises how (temporary) language contact affects the social identity and linguistic performances of members of transient communities through code-switching and code-mixing practices, which are, in turn, closely related to ethnicity-affirming processes.

[6] According to the latest figures, India is the second most significant sending country for international students (Burkhart *et al.* 2017).

References

Appadurai, Arjun, 1996, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization,* University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota.

Aschcroft, Bill, 2009, "Translation and Transformation", in O. Palusci, ed., *Traduttrici: Female Voices Across Languages*, Tangram Edizioni Scientifiche, Trento, pp. 25-45.

Beckner, Richard, Blythe, Richard, Bybee, John, Christiansen, Morten H., Ellis, Nick C., Holland, John, Ke, Jinyun, Larsen-Freeman, Diane and Schoenemann, Tom, 2009, "Language Is a Complex Adaptive System: Position Paper", *Language Learning* 59(1), pp.1-26.

Bhabha, Homi, 2004, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London.

Bhopal, Raj, 2004. "Glossary of Terms Relating to Ethnicity and Race: for Reflection and Debate", *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 58, pp. 441-445.

Bruneau, Michel, 2001, «Peuples-monde de la Longue Durée: Grecs, Indiens, Chinois», *L'Espace Géographique* 3, pp. 193-212.

Burkhart, Simone, Chehab-van den Assem, Nabila, Essig, Karin, Grützmacher, Judith, Heublein, Ulrich, Jechel, Lea, Kammüller, Susanne and Kercher, Jan, 2017, *Wissenschaft Weltoffen. Daten und Fakten zur Internationalität von Studium und Forschung in Deutchland*. Wbv, Bielefeld.

Caratini, Roger,1986, *La Force des Faibles*, Larousse, Paris.

Chaudhuri, Amit, 1993, *Afternoon Raag*, Oneworld Publications, London.

Chaudhuri, Amit, 2001, *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Chaudhuri, Amit, 2008, 'The East as a Career', *New Left Review* 40, pp. 111-126.

Chaudhuri, Amit, 2015, *Odysseus Abroad*, Oneworld Publications, London.

Ciocca, Rossella and Srivastava, Neelam (eds), 2017, *Indian Literature and the World: Multilingualism, Translation and the Public Sphere*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Clini, Clelia, 2017, "'Home is a Place You've Never Been to': A Woman's Place in the Indian Diasporic Novel", in R. Ciocca and N. Srivastava (eds) *Indian Literature and the World: Multilingualism, Translation and the Public Sphere*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, pp. 263-282.

Cohen, Abner, 1969, *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa: A Study of Hausa Migrants in Yoruba Towns*, Routledge, London.

Eckert, Penelope and McConnel-Ginet, Sally, 1992, "Communities of Practice: Language, Gender, and Power all Live", In K. Hall, M. Bucholtz and B. Moonwoman (eds), *Locating Power. Proceedings of the 1992 Berkeley Women and Language Conference*. Berkeley Women and Language Group, Berkeley, pp. 89-99.

FRIESEN, WARDLOW and KEARNS, ROBIN A. 2008, "Indian Diaspora in New Zealand: History, Identity and Cultural Landscapes", in P. Raghuram, A.K. Sahoo, B. Maharaj and D. Sangha (eds), *Tracing an Indian Diaspora. Contexts, Memories, Representations*, Sage, New Delhi, pp. 210-236.

GANDHI, LEELA, 1988, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney.

HARDER, HANS, 2010, "Indian Literature in English and the Problem of Naturalisation", in H. Harder (ed.), *Literature and National Ideology. Writing Histories of Modern Indian Languages*, Social Science Press, New Delhi, pp. 323-352.

IOM (INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION LAW), 2008. *Glossary on Migration 34*. International Organization for Migration, Geneva.

JAYARAM, N., 2004, *The Indian Diaspora: Dynamics of Migration*, Sage, New Delhi.

KACHRU, BRAJ B., 1965, "The Indianness in Indian English", *Word* 21:3, pp. 391-410, DOI: 10.1080/00437956.1965.11435436.

KACHRU, BRAJ B, 1983, *The Indianization of English. The English Language in India*, O.U.P., Oxford.

KACHRU, BRAJ B, 1986, *The Alchemy of English: The Spread, Functions, and Models of Non-native Englishes*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, Illinois.

LAVE, JEAN and WENGER, ETIENNE, 1991, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, C.U.P., Cambridge.

LEVON, EREZ, 2013, "Ethnography and Recording Interaction", in R.J. Podesva and D. Sharma (eds), *Research Methods in Linguistics*, C.U.P., Cambridge, pp. 195-213.

MATHUR, ANURAG, 1991, *The Inscrutable Americans*, Rupa e Co., New Delhi.

MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS, GOVERNMENT OF INDIA http://mea.gov.in, last accessed July 01, 2019.

MISHRA, VIJAY, 1996, "The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora", *Textual Practice* 10(3), pp. 421-447.

MORTENSEN, JANUS and FABRICIUS, ANNE, 2014, "Language Ideologies in Danish Higher Education: Exploring Student Perspectives" in A.K. Hultgren, F. Gregersen and J. Thøgersen (eds), *English in Nordic Universities: Ideologies and Practices*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam, pp. 193-223.

PARAMESWARAN, UMA, 2003, "Home is Where Your Feet Are, and May Your Heart be There Too!", in J. Jain (ed.), *Writers of the Indian Diaspora: Theory and Practice*, Jaipur: Rawat Publications.

REGNOLI, GIULIANA, 2019, "Translanguaging as an Expression of Transnational Identity. Ethnicity Renegotiation in the Indian Diaspora", *Translation and Translanguaging in Multilingual Contexts* 5, pp. 165-184.

RUSHDIE, SALMAN, 2006, *Midnight's Children*, Vintage, London.
RUSHDIE, SALMAN, 2010, *Imaginary Homelands*, Vintage, London
SAID, EDWARD W., 2000, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
SAFRAN, WILLIAM, 1991, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homelands and Return", *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1(1), pp. 83-99.
SAFRAN, WILLIAM, 2007, "Concepts, Theories, and Challenges of Diaspora: A panoptic Approach", Prepared for presentation at the workshop on *Dispersione, Globalizzazione e Costruzione dell'alterità: Diaspore e Migrazioni nel Bacino del Mediterraneo et Oltre (XIX-XX secc.)*, University of Pisa, Department of History, Marsala, Italy, September 18, 2007.
SAILAJA, PINGALI, 1999, *Dialects of English. Indian English*, Edinburgh U.P., Edinburgh.
SHACKLETON, MARK, 2008, "Introduction" in M. Shackleton (ed.), *Diasporic Literature and Theory: Where Now*?, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle Upon Tyne, pp. ix-xiv.
SHARMA, DEVYANI, 2014, "Translational Flows, Language Variation, and Ideology", in M. Hundt and D. Sharma (eds), *English in the Indian Diaspora*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam, pp. 215-242.
SKUTSCH, CARL, 2005, *Encyclopedia of the World's Minorities*, Routledge, London.
VERTOVEC, STEVEN, 1999, "Three Meanings of 'Diaspora', Exemplified among South Asia Religions", *Diaspora* 6 (3), pp. 277-300.