



Odysseus Journey

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After a quite steady spell with three books of non-fiction based on Calcutta and Tagore – now Amit Chaudhuri is back to where he belongs more, the prose writings in fiction. *Odysseus Abroad* is his sixth novel, which essentially tries to see the 'ordinary aspects of life' – and thus gets overt inspirations from two grim novels of yore days – Homer's *Odyssey* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*. How begins *Odysseus Abroad*.

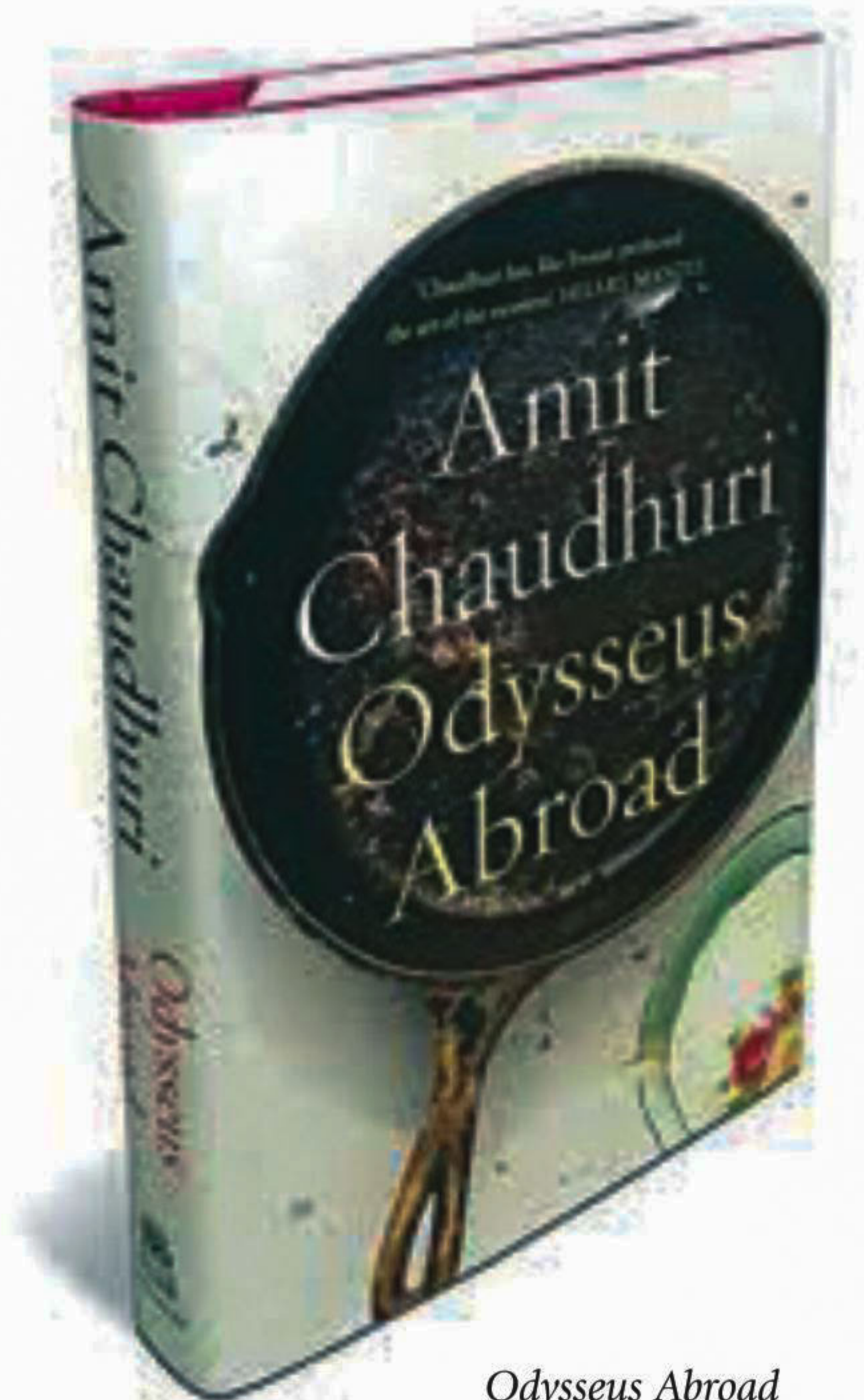
The novel has protagonist in a young college going Anand, who lives in Central and north London for a degree in English literature. Another central character is Ananda's uncle, Rangamama, an eccentric bachelor who has taken early retirement and lives-off his comfortable pension but in hygiene-less surrounding in Belsize Park. Here he lives with his combative personality in unusual but regular fashion – with no bath and relying too much on paranormal stories.

A substantial part of this novel traces a single day in Ananda's life – not much different from how Joyce did with Leopold Bloom and Woolf with Mrs Dalloway. The predicament of bond hardly deters a young man and an old man, being in friendship – sharing loneliness and the realities of life together, away from home.

The home is Calcutta – but in vague reckoning, it is also in Sylhet – but the displacement comes with heavy bearings, so it hardly surprises when Ananda's doesn't really feel a close affiliation with Sylheti cooks in London. The home and the world is not necessarily lived through the soft canopy of memories.

It would be hardly an exaggeration to call this novel semi-autobiographical. Amit Chaudhuri's parents came to this side of Bengal from Bangladesh during the partition.

In South Asian literatures, we often see the contexts compulsively moulded with grandness – this is more so with the English novels from this region. That makes the position of 'individual' and 'non-



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significant' essentially belittled – in that process, we see a great chunk of direct experiences of joy or sorrow losing their representation in standard genre of literatures.

A novel, primarily shaped through a protagonist is something elusive in this part of world – however time and again, there is some exceptions like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children*, Agyey's *Shekhar: Ek Jeevni*, Pankaj Mishra's *The Romantics* or Amit Chaudhuri's *A New World*. But that kind of writings need to be scaled-up to cover what has not been said about the human suffering and their persistence with life.

Once again Amit Chaudhuri has written a highly readable novel, with effortless balance on narrative – this deserves to be known, as one of the most remarkable works from him.

The writer is a journalist based in New Delhi.