

# Negotiating Belonging: Internal Diaspora in Amit Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address*

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## Abstract

*This paper explores the idea of internal diaspora in Amit Chaudhuri’s *A Strange and Sublime Address*, shifting the discussion away from conventional understandings of diaspora as migration across borders. Instead, it examines how emotional, cultural, and generational discontinuities within the same nation can also produce feelings of displacement. Through a close reading of the novel, the study argues that Chaudhuri constructs a subtle form of diasporic consciousness in the young protagonist, Sandeep, whose visit to his extended family in Calcutta becomes an encounter with a world that is both familiar and strangely distant. Using insights from diaspora theory and cultural memory studies, the paper shows how sensory detail, domestic routines, and temporal stillness contribute to Sandeep’s experience of quiet estrangement. Ultimately, the study highlights Chaudhuri’s contribution to a broader understanding of diaspora as a lived, psychological condition rather than merely a geographical event.*

**Keywords:** Internal Diaspora, Belonging, Memory, Cultural Identity, Amit Chaudhuri, Hybridity

## Introduction

Diaspora has often been understood through the lens of movement—whether migration, exile, or scattering across foreign spaces. Yet contemporary scholarship increasingly acknowledges that displacement may also take shape within one’s own cultural or national setting. Linguistic divides, regional distinctions, and generational differences can produce emotional and cultural distances that resemble the experiences of diasporic subjects, even when no physical migration has occurred.

Amit Chaudhuri’s *A Strange and Sublime Address* provides a compelling space to investigate such forms of internal displacement. The novel, which follows a young boy named Sandeep during a summer visit from Bombay to his relatives’ home in Calcutta, appears simple in structure but reveals deep emotional layers. What unfolds in the household—through smells, textures, routines, and familial interactions—stirs in Sandeep a quiet awareness of being both part of and apart from this world.

Although Chaudhuri’s work has been widely discussed for its aesthetic subtlety and lyrical attention to everyday life, scholars have paid less attention to how his fiction engages with forms of diasporic consciousness that occur without crossing borders. This paper addresses that gap by examining how Sandeep’s perspective reflects a kind of internal diaspora shaped by regional identities, cultural memory, and shifting generational values.

### **This Study has Four Aims**

- To demonstrate how the novel represents internal diaspora as an emotional and cultural condition.
- To explore how domestic spaces and sensory detail structure Sandeep’s sense of belonging and estrangement.
- To relate these observations to broader shifts in diaspora theory.
- To show how Chaudhuri’s narrative contributes to a more expansive understanding of displacement in postcolonial Indian literature.

### **Theoretical Background**

Diaspora theory has evolved considerably over the past three decades. Stuart Hall (1994) argues that identity in diaspora is shaped by fragmentation and continual negotiation, while Paul Gilroy (1993) highlights the tensions between inherited cultural memory and modern experiences. Avtar Brah’s (1996) concept of “diaspora space” goes further to include those who occupy emotional and cultural in-betweenness even without physical movement. Scholars like Vijay Mishra (1996, 2007) emphasise the imaginative and psychological dimensions of diasporic subjectivity.

These frameworks help illuminate Sandeep’s experience in the novel. Although he moves only from Bombay to Calcutta—a journey within the same country—he encounters a cultural world that feels distant from his everyday life. His displacement is thus less about geography and more about emotional orientation, memory, and the encounter with another rhythm of life.

### **Calcutta as a Landscape of Memory**

Chaudhuri’s Calcutta is not a city marked by monumental events; rather, it is a place where the past lingers in textures, smells, and sensory traces. The house Sandeep visits seems almost suspended in time, shaped by objects preserved across generations and by rituals that unfold at an unhurried pace. Everyday details—the thick air, old furniture, warm afternoons—create a world that carries its own quiet history.

For Sandeep, this environment is both comforting and alien. He recognises the cultural ties but is not completely at ease within them. The city becomes

a space where memory and identity intersect, and where he gradually realises that belonging is not fixed but negotiated. Calcutta functions as a “mnemonic landscape,” prompting him to reflect on how regional and cultural differences shape one’s emotional worlds.

### **Domestic Rituals and Partial Belonging**

Much of the novel’s beauty lies in its portrayal of domestic life. Bathing rituals, meals, idle conversations, and afternoon rest form the backdrop of Sandeep’s visit. These routines represent continuity and tradition, but for Sandeep they also highlight how his own everyday life in Bombay differs from that of his relatives.

He is both participant and spectator—joining in the rituals yet viewing them with a distance that reveals his unfamiliarity. This dual position mirrors the experience of diasporic subjects who belong to a culture yet perceive it through the lens of difference. His partial belonging suggests that internal diaspora is shaped by emotional awareness as much as by cultural practice.

### **Generational Transition and Hybrid Identity**

The generational dynamic in the novel further complicates the idea of belonging. Sandeep’s cousins navigate both traditional family structures and modern influences, embodying the hybrid identities of an India that is rapidly changing. Their lives are not entirely anchored in tradition, yet they are not fully aligned with the cosmopolitanism Sandeep brings from Bombay.

This contrast underscores the novel’s central idea: belonging is no longer inherited; it must be continually renegotiated. Sandeep’s identity is shaped not by a single cultural narrative but by multiple, sometimes conflicting, affiliations. Such hybridity reflects broader patterns in postcolonial societies where tradition and modernity coexist uneasily.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has examined how *A Strange and Sublime Address* redefines diaspora as an internal, emotional experience rather than a geographically determined one. Sandeep’s visit to Calcutta reveals

a subtle form of displacement shaped by regional identity, cultural memory, and generational difference. Through sensory detail and reflective narration, Chaudhuri illustrates how belonging can be textured, partial, and continually shifting.

By drawing attention to these forms of internal diaspora, the novel expands the boundaries of diaspora studies, demonstrating that fragmentation and in-betweenness are not limited to migrant narratives. Chaudhuri's work offers a nuanced account of identity formation in modern India, where cultural continuity and change coexist in everyday life. His portrayal encourages a broader understanding of diaspora as a psychological and cultural condition, deeply rooted in the intimate environments we inhabit.

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