

EVERYDAY LIFE AS LITERARY AESTHETIC: SMALL-TOWN INDIA IN THE FICTION OF R. K. NARAYAN AND AMIT CHAUDHURI

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how R. K. Narayan and Amit Chaudhuri transform ordinary Indian life into a literary aesthetic. Although both writers differ in period, region, narrative rhythm, and linguistic texture, they share a sustained interest in the small-scale worlds of streets, homes, bazaars, schoolrooms, meals, errands, family conversations, and modest aspirations. The study reads Narayan's Malgudi and Chaudhuri's Calcutta-centered fiction as literary spaces where everyday life becomes a serious field of social, cultural, and economic meaning. The study argues that the ordinary is not merely background in their fiction; it is the main structure through which class formation, domestic economy, urban change, consumption, aspiration, and moral life are represented. By bringing literary criticism into dialogue with economic sociology and theories of everyday life, the study shows that Narayan and Chaudhuri challenge grand narratives of nation, development, and modernity by foregrounding quiet, repetitive, and intimate forms of existence.

Keywords: Everyday life, small-town India, R. K. Narayan, Amit Chaudhuri, Malgudi, domestic economy, Indian English fiction, literary aesthetics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian English fiction has often been discussed through large historical categories such as colonialism, nationalism, migration, partition, globalization, and postcolonial identity. Yet an equally significant strand of Indian fiction develops through smaller units of experience: the lane, the veranda, the classroom, the tea shop, the market, the family room, the railway station, and the ordinary afternoon. R. K. Narayan and Amit Chaudhuri occupy an important position in this tradition because their fiction does not depend primarily on spectacular events. Instead, they convert the ordinary into an aesthetic principle. Narayan's fictional town of Malgudi and Chaudhuri's recurring world of Bengali middle-class domesticity present everyday life as a meaningful social archive [1], [2].

The economic relevance of this literary problem lies in the fact that everyday life is also the site where social class, consumption, labour, aspiration, and value are produced. A family's meal, a shopkeeper's calculation, a schoolboy's expenses, a clerk's routine, a singer's training, a household's use of servants, and a neighbourhood's changing architecture all reveal the economic organization of ordinary life. Henri Lefebvre argues that everyday life is not trivial; it is the place where modern social relations are reproduced most deeply [3]. Michel de Certeau similarly shows that ordinary practices such as walking, speaking, buying, cooking, and arranging domestic routines are meaningful forms of social action [4]. In this sense, Narayan and Chaudhuri are not merely writers of local colour; they are chroniclers of lived economies.

Narayan's Malgudi represents a semi-urban Indian world where tradition, commerce, education, bureaucracy, and modern aspiration meet without dramatic rupture. In *Swami and Friends*, *The Bachelor of Arts*, *The Financial Expert*, and *The Guide*, Narayan builds fiction out of small transactions, comic self-deceptions, and the moral limits of middle-class desire

[1], [5], [6], [7]. Chaudhuri, especially in *A Strange and Sublime Address*, *Afternoon Raag*, *Freedom Song*, and *A New World*, develops a more lyrical and fragmentary aesthetic of domestic observation [2], [8], [9], [10]. His fiction lingers on meals, rooms, dust, music, family conversations, servants, neighbourhoods, and slow urban time. In both writers, small-town or small-scale India becomes a literary form through which everyday economic and cultural life can be read.

2. EVERYDAY LIFE AS AESTHETIC METHOD

The ordinary in Narayan and Chaudhuri should not be mistaken for simplicity. Their fiction is carefully structured around small repetitions. In Narayan, everyday life appears through routine social spaces: Market Road, Kabir Street, school compounds, offices, banks, railway stations, printing presses, and temples. These places produce a stable fictional geography where characters pursue modest goals: passing examinations, earning respect, running a business, arranging marriage, gaining fame, or escaping family pressure [1], [5]. William Walsh observes that Narayan's art depends on restraint, balance, and an intimate knowledge of ordinary Indian life [11]. His characters are rarely heroic in the epic sense; they are comic, anxious, self-interested, affectionate, weak, and recognizably human.

Chaudhuri's method is different. He does not build a continuous town like Malgudi. Instead, he creates a sensory field of domestic and urban fragments. The sound of a fan, the smell of cooking, the presence of dust, the heat of an afternoon, the rhythm of a raga, and the movements of relatives inside a house become central narrative materials [2], [8]. Saikat Majumdar rightly identifies Chaudhuri's fiction with a heightened sense of the everyday, where objects and gestures produce the texture of lived time [12]. Chaudhuri's aesthetic is not plot-driven but mood-driven. His novels often move by perception rather than by event.

This difference is important. Narayan converts everyday life into comic narrative; Chaudhuri converts it into lyrical attention. Narayan's small town is social and dramatic. Chaudhuri's everyday world is intimate and sensuous. Yet both writers resist the idea that serious fiction must depend on historical catastrophe or political spectacle. Their fiction insists that the ordinary is itself historically dense.

3. MALGUDI AND THE MORAL ECONOMY OF SMALL-TOWN LIFE

Malgudi is one of the most recognizable fictional locations in Indian English literature. It is imaginary, but its social world is historically grounded. It contains schools, shops, municipal institutions, religious spaces, banks, printing presses, cinemas, and transport links. It is neither village nor metropolis. This intermediate quality makes it a powerful representation of small-town India. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar described Narayan's achievement as the creation of a complete fictional world rooted in Indian social reality [13].

From an economic perspective, Malgudi is a moral economy. Money circulates through trust, reputation, kinship, bargaining, credit, and self-presentation. In *The Financial Expert*, Margayya's rise as a financial adviser shows how small-town economies operate through informal trust, anxiety, and aspiration [6]. Margayya does not merely handle money; he handles people's fears and ambitions. His business grows because ordinary people seek financial mobility without fully understanding institutional finance. The novel quietly exposes the psychology of credit and the desire for upward movement in a semi-urban society.

Similarly, *The Guide* presents Raju's movement from railway guide to tourist broker, lover, performer's manager, prisoner, and reluctant saint [7]. His career reflects the changing economy of mobility, tourism, performance, and religious belief. Raju's life is comic and

tragic because he repeatedly turns social situations into opportunities for livelihood. Narayan does not condemn enterprise itself; rather, he shows how ambition becomes morally unstable when detached from self-knowledge.

In *Swami and Friends*, the economy is smaller but equally significant. School fees, books, cricket equipment, family expectations, and colonial education shape the life of children [1]. Swami's world is not economically abstract. It is structured by the limited resources and social ambitions of a lower-middle-class household. Childhood itself is placed within the economy of education, discipline, and respectability.

Narayan's small-town aesthetic therefore reveals how economic life is embedded in moral and social relations. His characters rarely speak in theoretical terms about class or capital, but their actions constantly reveal class position, material desire, and social pressure. This is close to Pierre Bourdieu's idea that everyday practices express habitus: socially formed dispositions that shape taste, behaviour, aspiration, and judgement [14].

4. CHAUDHURI AND THE DOMESTIC ECONOMY OF PERCEPTION

If Narayan's small-town life is organized around comic social movement, Chaudhuri's fiction is organized around domestic perception. His characters often belong to urban or semi-urban middle-class Bengali families. Their world is filled with relatives, servants, meals, music lessons, books, rooms, and neighbourhood walks. In *A Strange and Sublime Address*, the child Sandeep's visit to Calcutta becomes an occasion to observe domestic life with unusual intensity [2]. The novel does not move toward a conventional climax. Its real subject is the beauty and strangeness of ordinary habitation.

This domestic world also has an economic structure. The household is maintained by gendered labour, servant labour, inherited habits, and middle-class consumption. Food, cleaning, leisure, conversation, and music are not merely cultural details; they reveal the material basis of family life. In *Freedom Song*, Chaudhuri places family life against the political and economic changes of late twentieth-century India [9]. The novel registers liberalization-era anxieties not through policy discussion but through altered rhythms of work, marriage, education, and aspiration.

Chaudhuri's fiction is especially attentive to what may be called the micro-economy of attention. Objects become valuable because they are noticed. A room, a meal, a sound, or a street corner gains significance through perception. This is where Chaudhuri differs sharply from more event-centered postcolonial fiction. His novels do not dramatize national history as grand allegory. They approach history through traces: changes in neighbourhood life, family speech, domestic arrangements, and middle-class self-consciousness.

Leela Fernandes's work on India's new middle class is useful here because Chaudhuri's fiction often captures the older and transitional middle classes before and during economic liberalization [15]. His characters do not always embody aggressive consumer capitalism. Rather, they inhabit a world where cultural capital, education, music, English, family status, and urban memory matter deeply. Their economic identity is therefore not reducible to income. It is expressed through taste, speech, domestic order, and forms of leisure.

5. SMALL-TOWN INDIA, MODERNITY, AND THE REFUSAL OF SPECTACLE

Both Narayan and Chaudhuri complicate the idea of Indian modernity. In many developmental narratives, modernity is imagined through industry, infrastructure, metropolitan expansion, technology, and rapid social mobility. Narayan and Chaudhuri turn instead toward slower forms of change. They show that modernity enters everyday life

through schools, offices, banks, print culture, railways, music, consumer goods, family education, and new forms of aspiration.

In Narayan, modernity is often comic because characters misunderstand or overestimate its promises. The modern institution appears, but it is absorbed into older moral and social patterns. The bank, the school, the railway, and the law court do not erase tradition; they coexist with astrology, caste habits, family authority, religious belief, and local gossip [5], [6]. This coexistence gives Narayan's fiction its distinctive social texture.

In Chaudhuri, modernity appears as atmosphere rather than event. The old house, the servant, the educated family, the colonial residue of English education, the changing city, and the new economy exist together. His fiction records not the arrival of modernity but its sedimentation in daily life. Arjun Appadurai's discussion of modernity as lived through imagination, consumption, media, and locality helps explain this feature [16]. Chaudhuri's characters live in a world where the global and the local are present, but not always in dramatic conflict.

Their refusal of spectacle is therefore not a withdrawal from history. It is a different method of historical representation. The small town and the domestic interior become places where the effects of social change can be observed with greater delicacy. Narayan's humour and Chaudhuri's lyricism both protect the everyday from being dismissed as insignificant.

6. COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION: TWO AESTHETICS OF THE ORDINARY

Narayan and Chaudhuri share a commitment to ordinary life, but their aesthetics differ in four major ways. First, Narayan's everyday is narratively social, while Chaudhuri's everyday is perceptually inward. Narayan depends on incident, misunderstanding, irony, and comic reversal. Chaudhuri depends on mood, memory, rhythm, and sensory detail.

Second, Narayan's small-town India is represented through a fictional geography that becomes almost mythic. Malgudi is stable enough to sustain multiple novels and stories. Chaudhuri's spaces are less mythic and more fragmentary. His Calcutta is remembered, revisited, and sensuously reconstructed rather than systematized.

Third, Narayan's characters often seek livelihood, status, success, or moral escape. Chaudhuri's characters often dwell in perception, family relation, music, and memory. This does not make Chaudhuri less economic. Rather, his fiction shows how class is reproduced through culture, leisure, and domestic arrangement.

Fourth, Narayan's prose is clear, ironic, and deceptively plain. Chaudhuri's prose is slow, musical, and meditative. Narayan's ordinary life produces comedy; Chaudhuri's ordinary life produces wonder. Together, they expand the scope of Indian English fiction by showing that everyday life can sustain both social criticism and aesthetic refinement.

7. CONCLUSION

The fiction of R. K. Narayan and Amit Chaudhuri demonstrates that everyday life is not a minor literary subject. It is a central field where social values, economic relations, class identities, and cultural memory are formed. Narayan's Malgudi reveals the moral economy of small-town India through humour, modest ambition, and institutional change. Chaudhuri's fiction reveals the domestic and sensory economy of middle-class life through lyrical attention to rooms, meals, streets, music, and family rhythms.

Their work is especially important because it resists the pressure to define Indian fiction only through crisis, nation, migration, or political spectacle. They show that the ordinary has its own density. The small town, the household, the bazaar, and the neighbourhood are not passive backgrounds; they are active structures of meaning. In this sense, Narayan and

Chaudhuri offer a literary economics of everyday life: an account of how people inhabit value, desire, scarcity, taste, labour, and aspiration within the modest spaces of daily existence.

By reading them together, one can see two major aesthetic possibilities within Indian English fiction. Narayan makes the ordinary comic, social, and morally revealing. Chaudhuri makes it lyrical, intimate, and perceptually rich. Both make small-town and small-scale India visible as a serious literary world. Their fiction teaches that history is not only made in public events; it is also made in the repetition of ordinary days.

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