

EVERYDAY REALISM AND CULTURAL INTIMACY IN INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION: READING R. K. NARAYAN AND AMIT CHAUDHURI

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ABSTRACT

This study examines everyday realism and cultural intimacy in the fiction of R. K. Narayan and Amit Chaudhuri. It argues that both writers resist spectacular representations of India and instead construct literary worlds through ordinary gestures, domestic rhythms, locality, memory, and understated social relations. Narayan's Malgudi fiction turns the small town into a moral and social universe where everyday incidents reveal the pressures of caste, class, education, gender, religion, and colonial modernity. Chaudhuri's Calcutta fiction, especially *A Strange and Sublime Address*, *Afternoon Raag*, and *Freedom Song*, develops a quieter realism in which cultural life emerges through food, music, conversation, family routines, streets, afternoons, and sensory memory. By reading Narayan and Chaudhuri together, the study shows that Indian English fiction need not depend on national allegory, historical crisis, or postcolonial spectacle to produce serious social meaning. Their realism is intimate, local, and culturally embedded. It turns the ordinary into a mode of knowledge.

Keywords: everyday realism, cultural intimacy, Indian English fiction, R. K. Narayan, Amit Chaudhuri, Malgudi, Calcutta, locality, domesticity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian English fiction has often been discussed through large categories such as nation, colonialism, migration, modernity, identity, and postcolonial history. These categories are important, but they sometimes obscure another powerful tradition within the field: the literature of the ordinary. R. K. Narayan and Amit Chaudhuri belong to different generations, but both create fiction from modest social materials. Their novels do not depend primarily on political upheaval, heroic struggle, or dramatic historical rupture. Instead, they attend to small gestures, domestic spaces, local streets, habits of speech, family relationships, neighborhood rhythms, and the moral comedy of everyday life. In this sense, their fiction offers an alternative genealogy of Indian English realism.

Narayan's fictional town of Malgudi, introduced in *Swami and Friends*, becomes one of the most recognizable imagined localities in Indian literature [1]. It is not merely a setting; it is a social organism. Its schools, streets, markets, temples, railway station, households, and offices create a dense field of everyday relations. Chaudhuri's Calcutta, by contrast, is not organized around the compact fictional geography of a town. His city is remembered through sensory fragments, family visits, meals, music, heat, afternoon light, conversation, and the slow temporality of domestic life [2]. Yet both writers share a refusal of exaggeration. They show that social life is most deeply understood when it is observed in its ordinary forms.

The phrase "everyday realism" in this study refers to a literary method that makes ordinary life the main site of social knowledge. It is related to Raymond Williams's view that realism is not simply a matter of surface description but a way of representing social relations as lived experience [3]. It also draws from everyday-life theory, where Michel de Certeau, Henri

Lefebvre, and Ben Highmore have shown that routine practices are not trivial; they are forms through which culture, power, memory, and subjectivity are organized [4], [5], [6]. The phrase “cultural intimacy,” adapted from Michael Herzfeld, refers here to those familiar habits, gestures, embarrassments, pleasures, and shared codes through which a community recognizes itself from within [7]. Narayan and Chaudhuri are significant because they transform such intimacy into narrative form.

II. EVERYDAY REALISM AS LITERARY METHOD

Everyday realism in Narayan and Chaudhuri differs from documentary realism. It does not claim authority by accumulating social facts in a heavy manner. Rather, it produces recognition through tonal precision. In Narayan, a schoolboy’s anxiety, a vendor’s routine, a husband’s moral confusion, or a guide’s performance of holiness becomes a way of understanding the larger society. *Malgudi Days* is especially important in this regard because its short stories convert brief incidents into compact social revelations [8]. The ordinary event is never merely decorative. It becomes the unit through which social life is interpreted.

Narayan’s realism is marked by simplicity of narration, but this simplicity is deceptive. In *The Guide*, Raju’s transformation from railway guide to spiritual figure is presented through irony, chance, performance, and social expectation [9]. The novel does not reduce Raju to fraud or saint. Instead, it shows how public belief, economic opportunity, desire, guilt, and spiritual imagination interact in a small-town world. This is everyday realism at its most complex. The social world does not appear as abstract structure; it appears through daily transactions, misunderstandings, speech, appetite, and reputation.

Chaudhuri’s realism works differently. His fiction often loosens plot and privileges perception. In *A Strange and Sublime Address*, the child Sandeep’s visits to Calcutta are narrated through fragments of ordinary life: the sound of streets, the presence of relatives, the experience of meals, the texture of rooms, and the movement of afternoons [2]. Chaudhuri does not treat these fragments as background. They are the substance of the narrative. His fiction suggests that the ordinary is not a lower form of experience but a subtle field of aesthetic and cultural meaning. In *Clearing a Space*, Chaudhuri also argues for a rethinking of Indian modernity beyond the dominant postcolonial expectation that Indian writing must represent the nation through grand historical drama [10].

This resistance to spectacle links Narayan and Chaudhuri. Narayan’s *Malgudi* is not free from colonial and postcolonial structures, but he rarely announces them in ideological language. Chaudhuri’s Calcutta is shaped by class, bhadrak culture, music, political discussion, and urban change, but his narrative method keeps returning to minor perception. Their realism trusts the small scene.

III. MALGUDI AND THE SOCIAL LIFE OF THE LOCAL

Malgudi is one of Narayan’s central achievements because it converts locality into literary universe. In *Swami and Friends*, *Malgudi* is experienced from the viewpoint of childhood: school discipline, friendship, cricket, fear of authority, and the emotional geography of home and street [1]. Yet this child-centered world is also historically situated. Colonial education, missionary schooling, class difference, and bureaucratic authority shape Swami’s experiences. Narayan does not need to turn these structures into direct political argument. They enter through classroom encounters, domestic discipline, and the symbolic authority of English education.

In *The English Teacher*, the everyday world becomes more inward. Krishna’s domestic life, his love for Susila, and his grief after her death turn ordinary family experience into a

meditation on attachment, mortality, and spiritual continuity [11]. The novel's realism is not limited to external social detail; it includes emotional and metaphysical experience. Narayan's achievement lies in holding together the ordinary and the philosophical without allowing either to overpower the other.

Malgudi also permits Narayan to explore social change without abandoning comic proportion. In *The Vendor of Sweets*, Jagan's Gandhian habits, his sweet shop, his son Mali's Americanized ambitions, and the generational conflict between them reveal the pressures of postcolonial modernization [12]. The conflict is social, economic, and cultural, but Narayan renders it through father-son misunderstanding, business routine, food habits, and moral anxiety. The small domestic scene becomes a register of larger historical transition.

Critics have often noted that Narayan's prose appears transparent, but this transparency is a disciplined literary form [13]. His characters are not symbols first; they are persons caught in ordinary predicaments. Their lives show how cultural values operate not only through formal institutions but also through habit, gossip, family expectation, religious practice, and social reputation. This is why Malgudi remains persuasive as a literary world. It is imagined, but it feels socially inhabited.

IV. CHAUDHURI'S CALCUTTA AND THE AESTHETICS OF INTIMACY

Amit Chaudhuri's fiction shifts the focus from the small-town moral universe to the metropolitan domestic interior. His Calcutta is not the monumental city of political slogans or historical crisis. It is a city of houses, lanes, relatives, music lessons, meals, servants, fans, balconies, and recurring visits. In *A Strange and Sublime Address*, the city is filtered through childhood perception. Sandeep does not master Calcutta as a map; he absorbs it as atmosphere [2]. This gives the novel its distinctive form. It is less concerned with narrative destination than with the recovery of lived texture.

In *Afternoon Raag*, Chaudhuri extends this method through memory, music, and student life. The narrative moves between Oxford and India, but its emotional center remains attached to sensory recollection and cultural rhythm [14]. Music is crucial because it provides a structure of feeling rather than simply a theme. Chaudhuri's prose often behaves like a musical phrase: recursive, attentive, and finely modulated. The ordinary becomes aesthetic through repetition and variation.

Freedom Song places this intimate realism within a more explicitly social and political Calcutta. The novel is set against the background of political discussion, middle-class life, and the changing atmosphere of the 1990s [15]. Yet even here Chaudhuri avoids converting fiction into direct political thesis. Politics enters through conversation, family mood, generational uncertainty, and the texture of urban life. This method reveals how public life circulates through private rooms.

Chaudhuri's cultural intimacy is especially visible in his treatment of food, music, language, and family. These are not nostalgic ornaments. They are the means through which subjectivity is formed. His characters inhabit culture through repeated acts: eating, listening, visiting, remembering, speaking, and waiting. This is close to de Certeau's understanding of everyday practices as meaningful tactics within larger structures [4]. Chaudhuri's fiction shows that culture survives not only in institutions and manifestos but also in small acts of continuity.

V. CULTURAL INTIMACY, DOMESTICITY, AND SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE

Narayan and Chaudhuri both use domesticity as a serious literary space. In Narayan, the home is often a place of authority, affection, discipline, and conflict. Swami's house, Krishna's household, Jagan's domestic world, and Raju's relations with his mother all reveal the structure of social expectation. Domestic life is not private in a narrow sense. It is connected to caste, gender, religion, education, and economy.

In Chaudhuri, domesticity is less comic and more sensuous. The house becomes an archive of memory. Rooms, furniture, food, voices, and afternoon light carry cultural history. His domestic spaces are often middle-class and *bhadralok*, and therefore they also reveal class location. The intimacy of his fiction does not erase hierarchy; rather, it shows how hierarchy can be embedded in comfort, habit, and aesthetic refinement.

The concept of cultural intimacy helps explain why both writers are important. Herzfeld uses the term to describe those shared cultural recognitions that may be awkward, familiar, or unofficial but are central to collective self-understanding [7]. In Narayan, cultural intimacy appears in gossip, religious gestures, small frauds, family pride, and comic negotiation with authority. In Chaudhuri, it appears in food habits, musical memory, kinship conversations, and the languor of urban afternoons. Both writers show culture from inside its ordinary enactments.

This also has implications for the study of Indian English fiction. A narrow postcolonial reading may look only for resistance, hybridity, nationalism, or colonial discourse. These remain useful categories, but they do not exhaust the literary value of Narayan and Chaudhuri. Their fiction asks readers to consider locality, habit, and everyday perception as equally serious forms of history. As Priyamvada Gopal argues, the Indian English novel must be read through multiple aesthetic and political formations rather than through a single developmental story [16]. Narayan and Chaudhuri widen that field by making ordinary life central.

VI. COMPARATIVE READING: FROM MALGUDI TO CALCUTTA

The difference between Narayan and Chaudhuri is as important as their similarity. Narayan's fiction is usually more plot-driven. His characters are frequently caught in moral situations that develop through irony and consequence. Chaudhuri's fiction is more atmospheric and less dependent on conventional plot. Narayan's *Malgudi* has the structure of a social theatre; Chaudhuri's *Calcutta* has the structure of remembered experience.

Narayan's realism often moves through event: a school rebellion, a mistaken identity, a failed marriage, a business conflict, a spiritual performance. Chaudhuri's realism moves through perception: the sound of a street, the smell of food, the tone of a conversation, the emotional residue of a visit. Narayan's prose tends toward comic clarity. Chaudhuri's prose tends toward lyrical suspension. Yet both writers share a commitment to the dignity of the ordinary.

Their work also complicates the relation between locality and universality. Narayan's *Malgudi* is deeply local, but its emotional patterns—friendship, fear, ambition, grief, vanity, faith—are widely recognizable. Chaudhuri's *Calcutta* is culturally specific, but its treatment of memory, family, and sensory experience opens into broader questions of belonging. Neither writer abandons locality in order to become universal. Instead, both show that universality emerges through precise attention to local life.

VII. CONCLUSION

R. K. Narayan and Amit Chaudhuri offer two major models of everyday realism in Indian English fiction. Narayan turns Malgudi into a comic, moral, and social universe where ordinary incidents disclose the deeper structures of Indian life. Chaudhuri turns Calcutta into an intimate field of memory, perception, music, food, and domestic rhythm. Their fiction resists the demand that Indian writing must always represent itself through crisis, spectacle, or national allegory.

The importance of their work lies in their trust in small forms. A schoolboy's fear, a sweet vendor's worry, a railway guide's performance, a child's visit to relatives, a musical phrase, an afternoon meal, or a remembered room can carry profound cultural meaning. Everyday realism in their fiction is therefore not minor realism. It is a serious literary method. It brings into view the intimate structures through which people live culture before they explain it. By reading Narayan and Chaudhuri together, one can see that Indian English fiction has a rich tradition of quiet social knowledge—one in which the ordinary is not outside history but one of history's most enduring forms.

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