COHERENCE – The Multidisciplinary Research Journal
Volume No: 16, Issue No: 2, Year: 2025 (July-December)
PP: 49-53
ISSN: 0976-5301
Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 7.85)
Journal Website www.coherencejournal.in

FROM MALGUDI TO CALCUTTA'S LOCAL WORLDS: MAPPING THE AESTHETICS OF PLACE IN R. K. NARAYAN AND AMIT CHAUDHURI

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the aesthetics of place in R. K. Narayan and Amit Chaudhuri through a comparative reading of Malgudi and Calcutta's local worlds. Although both writers are often discussed as novelists of the ordinary, their treatment of place is not merely descriptive. It works as a literary method through which social relations, domestic routines, memory, class, mobility, and urban transformation become visible. Narayan's Malgudi is a fictional South Indian town, yet it functions with the density of a lived social economy: streets, shops, schools, railway stations, temples, markets, and households form a moral and material world. Chaudhuri's Calcutta, particularly in *A Strange and Sublime Address*, *Afternoon Raag*, and *Freedom Song*, is different in tone: slower, fragmentary, sensuous, and deeply attentive to domestic interiors, neighbourhood sounds, food, weather, and the rhythms of middle-class Bengali life. The study argues that Narayan produces place through narrative continuity and social typology, whereas Chaudhuri produces place through perception, pause, sensory detail, and memory. Both writers resist spectacular nationalism and metropolitan grand narrative by making the everyday local world the central ground of literary meaning.

Keywords: R. K. Narayan, Amit Chaudhuri, Malgudi, Calcutta, place, everyday life, Indian English fiction, local worlds, spatial aesthetics.\

I. INTRODUCTION

The literary imagination of place occupies a central position in Indian English fiction. In R. K. Narayan and Amit Chaudhuri, place is not simply the physical background against which characters act; it is a mode of perception, a social grammar, and a structure of everyday experience. Narayan's career is closely associated with Malgudi, the fictional town that appears across his novels and short stories, while Chaudhuri's fiction repeatedly returns to Calcutta as a local, domestic, and sensuous world. Critical accounts of Narayan often note his long fictional career and the centrality of Malgudi in his novels; Cambridge's account of Narayan records that he published fourteen novels and more than two hundred short stories, beginning with *Swami and Friends* in 1935. Similarly, discussions of Chaudhuri's fiction frequently stress his attention to Calcutta, family life, and the ordinary textures of urban existence.

This study studies Narayan and Chaudhuri through the aesthetics of place. The term "aesthetics of place" is used here to indicate how fiction gives form, rhythm, and meaning to locality. Such locality is not neutral. It contains social relations, habits of movement, family hierarchies, class positions, neighbourhood economies, religious practices, and modes of speech. In this sense, the study also has an economic dimension, though not in the narrow sense of market analysis. The economy of place appears in shops, occupations, domestic labour, small transactions, household routines, urban decline, educational aspiration, and middle-class consumption. Narayan's Malgudi and Chaudhuri's Calcutta are both built from these ordinary structures.

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Narayan's Malgudi first appears in *Swami and Friends* and later expands across works such as *The Bachelor of Arts*, *The English Teacher*, *The Financial Expert*, *The Guide*, *The Vendor of Sweets*, and *Malgudi Days* [1]–[6]. Chaudhuri's Calcutta appears not as a single plotted city but as a field of impressions in *A Strange and Sublime Address*, *Afternoon Raag*, *Freedom Song*, and his essays on the city [7]–[10]. The comparative value of these writers lies in their shared refusal of the sensational. Both bring literary dignity to small events: walking through a street, returning home from school, eating with relatives, observing shopkeepers, hearing music, watching light fall into a room, or sensing the slow change of a city.

II. MALGUDI AS SOCIAL MAP AND MORAL ECONOMY

Malgudi is one of the most recognizable fictional places in Indian English literature. Its power lies in its double nature: it is imaginary, yet it appears concrete; it is small, yet it suggests a larger Indian social world. Narayan does not present Malgudi through elaborate geographical description. Rather, he allows it to emerge gradually through repeated locations: Market Road, Lawley Extension, the Albert Mission School, the Sarayu river, the railway station, shops, houses, temples, and offices. These places acquire meaning because characters return to them across works. Malgudi becomes not only a setting but a social organism.

In *Swami and Friends*, the town is viewed through the consciousness of childhood. School, playground, street, riverbank, and home become zones of discipline, freedom, fear, friendship, and imagination [1]. The child's movement through Malgudi reveals the town's everyday structure. The school represents colonial education and authority; the street represents play and sociability; the home represents family discipline; the riverbank offers escape. Narayan's technique is economical. He does not explain the whole town at once. He allows the town to be mapped through use.

In *The Financial Expert*, Malgudi becomes a space of small-scale economic activity. Margayya's work under the banyan tree, his dealings with clients, his ambition, and his eventual moral decline show how local capitalism enters a traditional town [4]. Money here is not abstract. It circulates through trust, debt, reputation, advice, anxiety, and aspiration. Margayya's career demonstrates Narayan's ability to convert economic life into comic-moral narrative. Malgudi's economy is not the economy of large industry or metropolitan finance; it is the economy of small borrowers, clerks, traders, householders, and reputation-based transactions.

In *The Guide*, Malgudi expands further into tourism, performance, spirituality, and public fame [5]. Raju moves from railway guide to lover, impresario, prisoner, and reluctant saint. His life is shaped by the spaces he occupies: railway platform, tourist sites, Rosie's performance world, prison, village temple, and riverbed. Narayan uses place to trace moral transformation. The town and its surroundings become a theatre of social roles. Raju's identity changes when his spatial position changes. This indicates that, in Narayan, selfhood is inseparable from locality.

Malgudi also carries what may be called a moral economy. The phrase is useful because Narayan's fictional world repeatedly links economic behaviour to ethical consequence. Characters desire success, money, status, modernity, and recognition, but these ambitions are tested within a local moral order. In *The Vendor of Sweets*, Jagan's sweet shop, Gandhian habits, family conflict, and generational tension reveal a society moving between traditional self-restraint and modern consumer aspiration [6]. The shop is not only a business location; it is an ethical site where labour, food, money, fatherhood, and national ideals intersect.

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III. CALCUTTA'S LOCAL WORLDS IN AMIT CHAUDHURI

Amit Chaudhuri's Calcutta differs sharply from Narayan's Malgudi. It is not a compact fictional town but a remembered, inhabited, and sensuously perceived metropolis. Yet Chaudhuri avoids the monumental city. He does not write Calcutta primarily through political spectacle, colonial architecture, or metropolitan crisis. His attention falls on rooms, balconies, lanes, relatives, meals, servants, music, afternoon heat, dust, tram-like rhythms, and the pauses of domestic life.

In *A Strange and Sublime Address*, Calcutta is seen largely through Sandeep, a child visiting from Bombay [7]. This outsider-insider perspective is important. The city is familiar through kinship but unfamiliar through perception. Sandeep observes the household of his Chhotomama, the movement of relatives, the details of food, the sounds of neighbourhood life, and the subtle differences between Bombay and Calcutta. The novel does not depend on a strong plot. Its form is episodic, observational, and lyrical. This is central to Chaudhuri's aesthetics of place. Calcutta is not "introduced" as a city; it is slowly accumulated through detail.

Chaudhuri's essays also show his lifelong engagement with Calcutta as a particular modernity. In his essayistic reflection on the city, he describes Calcutta as a world that once appeared modern and distinctive, later seeming to lag behind other Indian cities during liberalization and rapid urban change. This sense of delayed or uneven modernity is crucial to his fiction. Calcutta is not merely backward or nostalgic. It is a city where older habits, middle-class interiors, colonial remains, and postcolonial change coexist. The city's slowness becomes aesthetically productive.

In *Freedom Song*, Chaudhuri places Calcutta within the political and social atmosphere of the 1990s [9]. Yet even here, the novel resists large dramatic plotting. Political change enters through conversation, family response, social mood, and everyday anxiety. The city is historical, but history is not delivered as event alone. It is mediated through domestic temporality. This is one reason Chaudhuri's fiction has been associated with the aesthetics of the ordinary. The New Yorker's review of Chaudhuri observes his attention to "domestic and urban life," especially in *A Strange and Sublime Address* and *Freedom Song*.

In *Afternoon Raag*, place becomes even more interiorized [8]. The novel moves between Oxford, Bombay, and Calcutta, but Calcutta remains a reservoir of memory, music, and family atmosphere. The city is not only a map; it is a rhythm of consciousness. Chaudhuri's prose often dwells on light, sound, temperature, and bodily sensation. These details produce an economics of attention. The ordinary becomes valuable because the narrative slows down enough to perceive it.

IV. COMPARATIVE AESTHETICS: CONTINUITY, DETAIL, AND EVERYDAY SPATIAL ORDER

Narayan and Chaudhuri share a deep investment in ordinary life, but their literary methods differ. Narayan's place-making is cumulative, social, and narrative-driven. Chaudhuri's place-making is fragmentary, sensuous, and reflective. Malgudi is remembered because it has recurring civic shape; Chaudhuri's Calcutta is remembered because it has recurring atmospheres.

Narayan's Malgudi is populated by recognizable social types: schoolboy, teacher, printer, shopkeeper, moneylender, guide, vendor, ascetic, journalist, municipal figure, and family elder. These characters make the town legible. Malgudi is therefore close to a social map. The reader understands place through occupation and role. The economy of Malgudi is visible in

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work and transaction. A schoolboy's fear of examination, a guide's dependence on tourists, a moneylender's authority, or a sweet-seller's discipline all show how social life is organized.

Chaudhuri's Calcutta, by contrast, is less concerned with social typology than with perceptual density. Domestic labour, food preparation, neighbourhood sound, family talk, music practice, and afternoon idleness carry the burden of place. His city is not arranged like a civic map; it is experienced as a set of sensory and emotional intervals. This does not make it less social. Rather, it reveals a different sociality: one built through household routines, kinship networks, class comfort, servants' labour, and inherited cultural capital.

Both writers also resist the metropolitan demand that fiction must be driven by crisis. Narayan often uses comedy, irony, and moral reversal; Chaudhuri uses stillness, delay, and impression. In both, the ordinary is not emptiness. It is the main field in which modern Indian life becomes intelligible. This is especially significant in Indian English fiction, where the nation, migration, partition, colonialism, and globalization often dominate critical discussion. Narayan and Chaudhuri remind readers that history also lives in lanes, meals, schools, shops, courtyards, and family rooms.

V. PLACE, CLASS, AND THE SMALL ECONOMIES OF EVERYDAY LIFE

The aesthetics of place in both writers is inseparable from class. Narayan's Malgudi is largely a lower-middle and middle-class world. Its people worry about school fees, jobs, business reputation, marriage, debt, family honour, and modest prosperity. These concerns shape the narrative tone. Even when Narayan is comic, the comedy often arises from material pressure. Margayya wants financial success; Jagan wants moral authority over his son and his business; Raju turns service work into performance and ambition [4]–[6]. Malgudi's charm should therefore not be mistaken for economic innocence. It is a town of aspiration and constraint.

Chaudhuri's Calcutta is often middle-class and culturally refined, but it is not economically neutral. The household depends on servants, food markets, inherited homes, educational privilege, music, and leisure. The slowness of Chaudhuri's fiction is partly enabled by class location. His characters can observe because they are not always struggling for survival. Yet the presence of servants, vendors, drivers, and neighbourhood workers quietly marks the class structure of the city [7], [9]. Chaudhuri's delicate prose does not erase inequality; rather, inequality appears through the arrangement of domestic life.

From an economics-oriented literary perspective, both writers show that place is produced by everyday material systems. Malgudi's streets are shaped by trade, credit, education, and local services. Calcutta's interiors are shaped by household labour, cultural consumption, and urban inheritance. In both, the economy is not only an institutional structure but a lived rhythm.

VI. LANGUAGE, SCALE, AND THE ETHICS OF THE LOCAL

Narayan's English is famous for its clarity, restraint, and comic transparency. His prose makes Malgudi accessible without exoticizing it. He writes local Indian life in English, but his language avoids heavy ornament. This stylistic simplicity contributes to the town's believability. Malgudi seems ordinary because the prose does not overburden it with symbolic explanation.

Chaudhuri's prose is more lyrical and meditative. His sentences often pause over small perceptions. He gives value to what conventional realism may pass over: dust, sunlight, a meal, a song, a lazy afternoon, the tone of a relative's voice. This style produces an ethics of

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attention. To attend carefully to the ordinary is to resist the idea that only spectacular events deserve literary form.

The question of scale is also important. Narayan's small town becomes universal not because it stands abstractly for India, but because its local forms are fully realized. Chaudhuri's Calcutta becomes meaningful not because it represents the entire nation, but because it records the fragile textures of a particular urban culture. Both writers show that the local is not minor. It is a serious literary scale.

VII. CONCLUSION

R. K. Narayan and Amit Chaudhuri offer two major models of place-making in Indian English fiction. Narayan's Malgudi is a socially coherent fictional town whose streets, schools, shops, railway spaces, and households create a durable moral economy. Chaudhuri's Calcutta is a sensuous and domestic city, formed through memory, perception, family life, and slow attention to the ordinary. Narayan maps place through recurring social structures; Chaudhuri maps it through atmosphere and detail.

The comparison shows that the aesthetics of place is also an aesthetics of everyday life. Both writers move away from grand spectacle and instead make locality the ground of literary seriousness. Their fiction teaches that places are not merely locations; they are lived arrangements of memory, class, labour, aspiration, habit, and feeling. From Malgudi to Calcutta's local worlds, Indian English fiction finds one of its most enduring forms in the careful representation of ordinary places.

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