

# THE POETICS OF THE ORDINARY: DOMESTIC SPACES, LOCAL STREETS, AND EVERYDAY RHYTHMS IN NARAYAN AND CHAUDHURI

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the literary aesthetics of ordinary life in R. K. Narayan and Amit Chaudhuri, with special attention to domestic interiors, neighbourhood streets, family routines, local speech, and the slow rhythms of small-town and urban India. Narayan's Malgudi and Chaudhuri's Calcutta are not merely settings; they are lived spaces where social relations, memory, class, habit, and cultural identity take narrative form. The study argues that both writers resist spectacle and large historical drama by turning everyday experience into a refined literary method. Narayan's ordinary world is organized through irony, moral comedy, and a compact narrative structure, while Chaudhuri's ordinary world is shaped through sensory attention, musical pacing, domestic observation, and fragmentary urban memory. The paper shows that the ordinary, in both writers, becomes a serious aesthetic category through which Indian English fiction represents social change without abandoning intimacy, locality, and human particularity.

**Keywords:** R. K. Narayan, Amit Chaudhuri, ordinary life, domestic space, Malgudi, Calcutta, Indian English fiction, everyday aesthetics.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Indian English fiction has often been read through large themes such as nationalism, postcolonial identity, migration, caste, gender, and political violence. Yet an equally significant tradition in Indian writing is the representation of the ordinary: the routines of home, the movement of people through streets, the sounds of vendors, schoolrooms, railway stations, courtyards, kitchens, verandas, and neighbourhood conversations. R. K. Narayan and Amit Chaudhuri are two major writers who give this ordinary world a sustained literary dignity. Their fiction suggests that everyday life is not outside history; rather, history enters quietly through family habits, domestic arrangements, speech patterns, occupations, food, music, education, and neighbourhood movements.

Narayan's fictional town of Malgudi, introduced in *Swami and Friends*, becomes one of the most recognizable literary spaces in Indian English fiction [1]. It contains schools, markets, temples, riverbanks, railway stations, homes, offices, streets, and modest ambitions. Narayan does not usually dramatize social life through violent rupture. He gives narrative importance to small incidents: a schoolboy's fear, a shopkeeper's anxiety, a teacher's grief, a guide's performance, a printer's uncertainty, or a householder's moral confusion [2], [3]. His poetics of the ordinary is therefore comic, humane, and ethically alert.

Amit Chaudhuri, writing much later, develops a more meditative and sensuous aesthetics of everyday life. In *A Strange and Sublime Address*, *Afternoon Raag*, and *Freedom Song*, the city is not presented as a grand metropolitan machine but as a set of domestic and sensory impressions: ceiling fans, meals, songs, lanes, balconies, visits, light, dust, afternoon stillness,

and family voices [4]–[6]. Chaudhuri’s fiction often appears plot-light, but this is a deliberate artistic choice. He writes the rhythms of life rather than only the events of life. This paper studies how Narayan and Chaudhuri convert the ordinary into literary form through domestic spaces, local streets, and everyday rhythms.

## II. DOMESTIC SPACE AS NARRATIVE WORLD

Domestic space in Narayan’s fiction is compact, moral, and socially embedded. The home is rarely a private zone separated from society. It is a site where generational authority, economic limits, emotional dependency, and moral expectation meet. In *The English Teacher*, Krishna’s domestic life with Susila and their child becomes the emotional centre of the novel [3]. The household is not described through decorative excess; it is marked by intimacy, routine, affection, illness, and loss. Narayan’s domestic realism is restrained. He does not overstate grief; instead, he shows how ordinary life is altered by absence. The room, the child, the daily schedule, and the memory of marital companionship become the medium through which sorrow is narrated.

In *The Guide*, domestic and semi-domestic spaces also structure social identity. Raju’s childhood shop near the railway station, his mother’s presence, Rosie’s temporary residence, and Marco’s scholarly detachment all show how personal relationships are shaped by spatial arrangements [7]. Narayan’s homes are not merely background locations; they reveal the moral economy of characters. They show who belongs, who performs, who commands, who waits, and who is judged.

Chaudhuri’s domestic spaces are more sensorial and less moralizing. In *A Strange and Sublime Address*, the Calcutta household is seen through a child’s visiting consciousness [4]. Rooms, meals, relatives, servants, heat, sleep, and conversation form the actual substance of the novel. The domestic interior becomes a chamber of perception. The child does not impose a large social argument on what he sees; he receives the world in fragments. Chaudhuri therefore makes domestic life not only a theme but also a structure. The novel moves as domestic experience moves: through repetition, interruption, sound, food, memory, and minor surprise.

In *Freedom Song*, the household becomes connected to political atmosphere without becoming a political stage [6]. The city of Calcutta in the 1990s, marked by ideological residues and middle-class anxieties, is refracted through family life. Discussions, habits, illness, marriage prospects, music, and political references coexist. Chaudhuri’s method is important because he does not separate the public from the domestic. Political life appears as part of conversation, tone, mood, and daily adjustment. This makes his fiction sociologically attentive without becoming programmatic.

## III. LOCAL STREETS AND THE SOCIAL TEXTURE OF PLACE

Narayan’s Malgudi is built through streets and public movement. The street in Narayan is a social corridor. It connects the school, the market, the railway station, the temple, the printing press, the river, and the home. In *Swami and Friends*, the child’s experience of Malgudi is inseparable from movement through school and town [1]. The town is small enough to be knowable, yet large enough to contain fear, friendship, authority, and fantasy. Narayan’s local streets generate narrative possibility because they bring unlike characters into contact.

The railway station is especially important in Narayan’s spatial imagination. In *The Guide*, the station is a place of arrival, commerce, storytelling, and transformation [7]. Raju’s identity as “Railway Raju” emerges from this public space. He becomes a guide because the station creates a demand for interpretation. Visitors need the town explained; Raju converts

local familiarity into livelihood. Here Narayan shows how economy, speech, mobility, and performance meet in the ordinary public space of a small town.

Malgudi's streets are also comic spaces. Characters meet, misunderstand, exaggerate, gossip, bargain, and perform respectability. Narayan's comedy depends on the visibility of social life. People are known to one another. Reputation travels quickly. This gives his fiction a delicate social pressure. The street is not anonymous; it is a stage on which ordinary people negotiate dignity.

Chaudhuri's streets are different. His Calcutta streets are not primarily comic stages; they are sensory and mnemonic spaces. In *A Strange and Sublime Address*, the lanes and neighbourhoods of Calcutta appear through sound, light, humidity, domestic errands, and the child's alert but unhurried gaze [4]. The street is an extension of the home. It is not sharply separated from interior life. Vendors, relatives, servants, neighbours, and passers-by create a porous world in which the household breathes with the city.

In Chaudhuri, local streets often carry the rhythm of return. They are experienced not as new discoveries but as familiar presences. The ordinary street becomes beautiful because it is repeatedly encountered. This differs from tourist vision. Chaudhuri does not exoticize the city. He attends to it from within. His streets are marked by modest transitions: morning to afternoon, heat to evening, silence to conversation, private thought to public sound. Such attention converts the local into the lyrical.

#### IV. EVERYDAY RHYTHM AS FORM

The most important similarity between Narayan and Chaudhuri is their respect for rhythm. Both writers understand that everyday life has its own pacing. However, they shape this rhythm differently. Narayan's rhythm is narrative and comic. His chapters often move through a chain of small events that gradually produce moral consequence. A boy's mischief, a man's lie, a business plan, a domestic argument, or a misunderstanding develops into a larger crisis. Yet the crisis remains tied to ordinary motives: fear, ambition, vanity, love, hunger, status, or insecurity.

In Narayan's work, ordinary rhythm is also connected to speech. His prose is clear, economical, and lightly ironic. The simplicity of the sentence often conceals the complexity of the social situation. This has led critics to emphasize Narayan's art of understatement and his rootedness in Indian social life [8], [9]. His style gives the impression of ease, but that ease is highly controlled. The ordinary becomes literary because Narayan selects, compresses, and arranges it with comic precision.

Chaudhuri's rhythm is closer to music and memory. As a novelist and musician, he often writes through recurrence, tonal variation, and pauses [10]. His fiction does not always move toward dramatic resolution. Instead, it dwells in moments. Meals, songs, afternoon sleep, street sounds, fragments of conversation, and family gestures return like motifs. This technique is visible in *Afternoon Raag*, where student life, music, memory, and desire are organized through reflection rather than conventional plot [5].

Chaudhuri's everyday rhythm is also anti-spectacular. He resists the pressure to make Indian fiction stand for national allegory at every moment. His work suggests that the small, the unfinished, and the repetitive are central to experience. This does not mean his fiction lacks social meaning. Rather, social meaning appears through duration. The reader gradually understands class, family, city, modernity, and cultural inheritance through the texture of repeated acts.

## V. THE ORDINARY AND SOCIAL CHANGE

The ordinary in Narayan and Chaudhuri is never static. It registers social change quietly. Narayan's Malgudi changes through education, print culture, commerce, tourism, law, bureaucracy, and modern professions. The town may appear timeless, but it is constantly negotiating modernity. In *Mr. Sampath*, the world of printing and cinema brings new forms of aspiration and instability [11]. In *The Guide*, tourism, performance, archaeology, dance, and media attention disturb older social certainties [7]. Narayan's ordinary world is thus a transitional world.

However, Narayan avoids heavy ideological narration. He places social change inside character and incident. The result is a form of realism in which modernity is experienced as adjustment rather than manifesto. Characters do not always understand the historical forces shaping them. They respond practically, selfishly, emotionally, or comically. This is one reason Narayan's fiction remains persuasive: it respects the partial awareness of ordinary people.

Chaudhuri's social change is more atmospheric. In *Freedom Song*, middle-class Calcutta carries traces of political ideology, liberalization-era uncertainty, cultural nostalgia, and family continuity [6]. Chaudhuri does not present change as a single decisive break. He shows it as a shift in mood, speech, aspiration, and domestic expectation. The old world remains present, but it no longer feels secure. The new world arrives, but it is not fully embraced. This suspended condition gives Chaudhuri's fiction its quiet historical intelligence.

Both writers therefore challenge the idea that only dramatic events are historically meaningful. Narayan shows change through small-town institutions and comic crises. Chaudhuri shows change through domestic perception and urban atmosphere. In both, the ordinary is not an escape from history; it is history's most intimate form.

## VI. COMPARATIVE AESTHETICS: IRONY AND LYRICAL ATTENTION

Narayan's poetics of the ordinary is shaped by irony. His characters often misunderstand themselves. They wish to appear wiser, stronger, richer, more spiritual, or more modern than they are. The narrative gently exposes these illusions without cruelty. This produces a humane comedy. Narayan's ordinary world is full of weakness, but it is not without grace. Even flawed characters are allowed a measure of dignity.

Chaudhuri's poetics is shaped by lyrical attention. He does not depend heavily on irony, though his fiction contains quiet humour. His central artistic act is noticing. He notices light on surfaces, the rhythm of speech, the movement of relatives in a house, the emotional charge of music, the languor of afternoons, and the half-visible life of the city. His fiction makes perception itself a narrative event.

The difference may be expressed as follows: Narayan turns the ordinary into story; Chaudhuri turns the ordinary into atmosphere. Narayan's Malgudi is memorable because events happen there with comic inevitability. Chaudhuri's Calcutta is memorable because moments linger there with sensuous depth. Narayan's art is closer to fable, social comedy, and moral realism. Chaudhuri's art is closer to memory, music, and phenomenological observation.

Yet both writers share an important ethical position. They refuse to treat ordinary life as insignificant. Their fiction values the small scale of human existence. In a literary culture often attracted to crisis, spectacle, and grand historical narration, Narayan and Chaudhuri

remind readers that the ordinary is not empty. It contains labour, affection, hierarchy, boredom, beauty, conflict, and memory.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The fiction of R. K. Narayan and Amit Chaudhuri demonstrates that the ordinary can become a powerful literary aesthetic. Domestic rooms, neighbourhood streets, family routines, small professions, meals, errands, school life, music, conversations, and local movements are not minor details in their work. They are the very substance of narrative meaning. Narayan's Malgudi gives ordinary life a comic and ethical form, while Chaudhuri's Calcutta gives it a lyrical and sensory form. Both writers create literary worlds where locality is not narrow and domesticity is not trivial.

Their importance lies in the way they enlarge the reader's attention. Narayan teaches us to see the moral drama hidden in small-town life. Chaudhuri teaches us to hear the music of ordinary duration. Together, they offer a major tradition within Indian English fiction: a tradition in which everyday life becomes art, and the smallest rhythms of home and street become a way of understanding society, history, and human experience.

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