

# The Representation of the Everyday as Socio-Political Signifier in Amit Chaudhuri's Selected Works

Ananya Hiloidari

## Abstract

This article focuses on the role of the everyday in writing local histories, and in projecting the immediate realities of the present. It engages with the everyday as a site of revelation and critique, although the everyday is often put in the margins of the institutional activities of man. This article examines select essays and novels of Indian English writer Amit Chaudhuri in the light of the everyday and points out that in some of his writings the everyday serves as a socio-political signifier. The basic premise of this article is that in the heart of the everyday lies embedded the larger socio-political realities which shape ordinary lives and the entire social unconscious.

**Keywords:** Capitalism, *flâneur*, local knowledge, the everyday.

## Introduction

According to Harry Harootunian "everydayness is a form of disquiet" (Harootunian 21). This proposition signifies that the everyday may serve as a site of both critique and transformative possibilities: it is a site of socio-political exploration and also, at times, suggests the potential for creating alternative spaces within itself. This notion challenges the traditional notion of the everyday as an insignificant site compared to the official mode of human behaviours and activities. In this context, Bishnupriya Ghosh's observation is remarkable. She rightly observes that for many contemporary South Asian writers, the everyday has become a chosen subject, a significant constituent of their discursive formation. Ghosh particularly refers to Arundhati Roy as a novelist who deliberately privileges the everyday in her *The God of Small Things*. Ghosh considers such narra-

tive focus as a useful medium for critiquing globalism (Ghosh 65). It is not only Arundhati Roy who takes resort to the everyday as a mode of critiquing globalism or capitalism. In some of the non-fictional works and novels of Amit Chaudhuri too there is a powerful observation of the reification of ordinary lives in the backdrop of the quotidian and the everyday.

Before looking at the representation of the everyday in Amit Chaudhuri's writings it is important to understand the everyday as a critical site. In this context, Ben Highmore's assessment of the everyday is remarkable as it emphasizes that the everyday does not signify the dull, familiar, and banal sides of life. Highmore, in *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* discusses various social, political and cultural significations of everyday life. Although the everyday or "everyday life" generally refers to the routine or day-to-day activities, Highmore comments that there is always an ambivalence in its signification. He points out two aspects of everyday life: "Here the everydayness of everyday life might be experienced as sanctuary, or it may bewilder or give pleasure, it may delight or depress. Or its special quality may be its lack of qualities. It might be, precisely, the unnoticed, the inconspicuous, the unobtrusive" (Highmore 1). Although the everyday signifies the most familiar and the most recognizable, there is always a possibility that the unfamiliar may disturb and disrupt the apparently familiar and the recognizable. Highmore calls it the "shock of the new", which may send tremors to the core of the everyday (Highmore 2).

The everyday has the ability to witness the emergence of the new, the strange, and the revolutionary into the space of the familiar and the quotidian. Highmore appropriately alludes to the character of Sherlock Holmes to interpret the strangeness of the everyday. For this famous fictional character created by Arthur Conan Doyle, the world of the everyday signifies the dull, the banal, and the humdrum. But Highmore comments that the everyday is the site of the bizarre, the strange, and the mysterious, not merely of dull everydayness. In fact, Sherlock Holmes, who takes the everyday route to solve mysteries, becomes a symbol of demystification of the bizarre and the mysterious. According to Highmore, Holmes' act of solving mysteries serves as a symbol of the return to the everyday. Highmore points out that the everyday as a site where social structures lie embedded, and it is important to see how classic literary narratives represent it as a powerful social analyzer. In our world of institutionalized work, the quotidian practices are often associated with the everyday and the banality of everydayness. But this banality, emerging out of repetitive day-to-day practices and the boredom associated with it, can be

a socio-political signifier too. Highmore says that the everyday temporality, which creates monotony and boredom, can be treated as a powerful medium of diagnosing social class. He alludes to the classic example of boredom of the aristocratic life as represented in the character of Emma Bovary in Gustav Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary*. The life of Emma Bovary exhibits an aristocratic everyday life, where luxury and excess are part of a daily routine and where there is an absolute absence of differentiation which would erase the deadening quality of the everyday. So the everydayness of the everyday, whether it is focused on the domestic site or the public sphere, serves as a medium of social diagnosis.

### **The Mundane and the Strange of the Everyday**

Majority of the works of Amit Chaudhuri explore the everyday, both in the home and in the street. Chaudhuri is a writer who has recognized the potential of the everyday as a medium of generating counter-discourse to the official discourses where the everyday is put under erasure. The everyday in some of his novels and essays has been represented as a space for creating local knowledge, and for diagnosing the hegemonic politics of the existing social structures in the domestic and the public sphere. Chaudhuri takes into account both the mundane and the strange aspects of the everyday. Like the character of Sherlock Holmes, the characters and the situations represented in the novels of Chaudhuri demystify the mysterious and return to the everyday. Simultaneously, the everyday in his novels gets disrupted by the emergence of the new and the revolutionary. The everyday which is often submerged in the official narrative of man's history, comes to be foregrounded in Chaudhuri's writing. As the character of Emma Bovary in Flaubert's novel, trapped in everydayness and boredom, represents the psychology of a woman in the backdrop of existing social structures, the characters, and situations in the novels of Chaudhuri reflect hidden socio-political structures which lie embedded in the everyday.

To analyze Amit Chaudhuri's writings in the light of the everyday, it is necessary to look at Walter Benjamin's theory of the everyday. Benjamin's notion of the everyday particularly engages with the trash or the discarded materials of the everyday scene, and has many similarities with Amit Chaudhuri's representation of quotidian life in his writings. Benjamin, in his *Arcades Project* presents the nineteenth century Paris for tracing the everyday. He also deals with the problematic of finding out an accurate mode of articulating the modern everyday. Benjamin introduces the concept of the *flâneur* – a word adapted by him from the work of the French

poet and critic Charles Baudelaire. Benjamin adopts this word to theorize a society based on consumerism, where the practices of consumption rather than production are predominant. The *flâneur* belongs neither to the poorest, nor to the wealthiest – he exists in the margin of both the urban world and the bourgeoisie; he walks in the city and witnesses the images of urban life and bourgeois culture as spectacles. The word *flâneur* can be translated as “stroller” or “loiterer” – an emblem of modernity. Charles Baudelaire used the term *flâneur* in his “The Painter of Modern Life” to define a consumer of the modern urban life or the city. Benjamin has borrowed this concept from Baudelaire to project the *flâneur* as the characteristic figure of modernity, who wanders through the streets of the city to catch its images – as both observer and consumer. Amit Chaudhuri as a critic and as a writer of fiction has been much influenced by Benjamin’s projection of *flâneur*. It is reflected in his essay “Kalighat Revisited” in which he presents the everyday as a reflection of the contemporary collective consciousness. Chaudhuri projects Kalighat paintings as being embedded, both artificially and psychologically, in the history and popular culture of the time. The Kalighat paintings, in his opinion, serve as the representation of the birth of the urban modernity in the nineteenth century Calcutta. The images and motifs of these paintings were borrowed from the urban life of that time. In the essay Chaudhuri particularly mentions a painting where Shiva and Parvati, along with Kartik take Ganesh out on a family outing, “looking rather like a lower-middle-class family in Marxist Bengal” (Chaudhuri 279).

The painting displays the cosmopolitan world of colonial Calcutta, as Kartik is shown wearing fashionable, westernized buckled shoes. These mythical figures become part of an urban everyday, to reveal truths about the socio-economic parameter of that time when the painting was done. Chaudhuri feels that even the festival of Durga Puja has been transformed by the craftsmen and artisans from a harvest festival into a dimension of creative exploration. Chaudhuri comments that such transformations serve as an “outrageous comment on urban reality” (279), as apart from working as cultural signifier they work simultaneously as social comment and parody. Chaudhuri points out that in this process the sacred is transformed into the political. He defines the *flâneur* as the significant element of the construction of the nineteenth-century modernity in Calcutta. In the context of modern bourgeois India, the *flâneur* operates in the domestic space, as projected by the painting of Shiva and Parvati, along with Ganesh and Kartik – the entire divine family becoming the representative of the urban *flâneur*. They become loiterers and customers, enacting the constituents of a capitalist urban life.

In the essay titled "Arun Kolatkar and the Tradition of Loitering", Chaudhuri points out that the *flâneur* is present in the poetic talent of Kolatkar. He particularly discerns this aspect in Kolatkar's famous collection of poems *Jejuri*, published in 1976. Chaudhuri refers to Kolatkar's fondness for visiting a place in Bombay Wayside Inn, from the window of which he could observe the "low-life, the obscure daily-wage-earners, and itinerant families" (222). He relates it to Benjamin's definition of the *flâneur*, as an analogue for receptivity and creativity. For Kolatkar the modern metropolis with its everydayness becomes a medium of observing and exploring the familiar to find deeper realities. In the observation of the *flâneur* the binaries of the interior and the exterior or the private and the public become blurred and it becomes possible to search the mysterious, the strange and the marvelous in the everyday. Kolatkar, while looking out from the window of the Wayside Inn found the interior being mingled with the exterior. For Chaudhuri it is the "indeterminate space, where the street turns into an interior, and which complicates the urban boundary separating room from pavement, that's so crucial to the *flâneur's* experience of reality" (231).

### **The Urban *flâneur* in Amit Chaudhuri's Novels**

In most of his novels, Chaudhuri's characters emerge as urban *flâneur*, indulging themselves in aimless walks, revealing epiphanic realities hidden in the everyday. The *flâneur*, at the same time becomes an observer of the shifts in the public domain, as the everyday reveals the socio-political changes through the quotidian details. Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address* presents the central character named Sandeep as the *flâneur*, who walks aimlessly at times, to observe and to record the urban life of the city of Calcutta. Calcutta gets projected through the eyes of Sandeep as well as through the detached description of the everyday in the novel's narrative:

Calcutta is a city of dust ... the roads are always being dug up, partly to construct the new underground railway system, or perhaps for some other obscure reason ... Calcutta is like a work of modern art that neither makes sense nor has utility, but exists for some esoteric reason... Daily, Calcutta disintegrates, unwhispering, into dust, and daily it rises from dust again. (14)

Here Calcutta emerges as a site of repeated, routine activities which do not offer any magic or strangeness. The newly industrialized face of Calcutta even transforms the public domain – which is supposed to be a space of constant renewal or changes, into a site which loses all possibility of

strangeness. West Bengal in the 1980s saw industrial stagnation due to the centre's negligence. However, the adoption of the new economic policies in 1991 by the Narasimha Rao-led Congress Government in the centre opened up new vistas of economic development in the entire country. The Jyoti Basu Government in West Bengal announced the industrial policy in 1994 which emphasized on the use of new technology and economic development. Against the backdrop of this shifting economic scenario, the city of Calcutta changed two. Chaudhuri's novels which present the newly industrialized city of Calcutta, emphasize the problematic of these transformations through the representation of the everyday. The past and the present of the city emerge intertwined in the everyday details:

They went past the bridge in Dhakuria, past Gol Park, where a statue of Swami Vivekananda, with arms folded in fierce serenity, stood staring unflinchingly at an advertisement for biscuits; past Goriahat market; past Rashbari Avenue, which would be lit with rows and rows of shops on a weekday, and which was distinguished by having the largest number of underwear shops in the world; then into Chowringhee with its colonial buildings, vacant and proud, looking on Sunday evening like a black and white photograph of another era. (Chaudhuri 18)

The everyday details here conceptualize and organize the local realities of the city of Calcutta in the backdrop of the transforming present.

In Chaudhuri's *Freedom Song* the quotidian side of life is shown to be enacted by birds and animals: "Morning came to the house through the windows at the back of the second storey, via a school in a field and a doctor's house; when a shutter was opened, the light found its way

straight to one's eye. By this time mynah, shaliks, sparrows, crows, had began to echo on parapets and window-sills, and a cat had waken up and fallen asleep again" (248-249). The way the interior and the exterior or the private and the public encroach into each other, the industrialized and the natural also encroach into each other's space in Chaudhuri's portrayal of the everyday. *Freedom Song* presents the newly industrialized Calcutta and the gradual emergence of a consumer culture through the juxtaposition of the interior and the exterior:

Then, when the train had gone, the air was cleansed, and the room was as quiet as the reflection in the dressing table mirror, with Oil of Ulay, Lactocalamine, Vaseline, Pond's Dream Flower Talc, and

the lipsticks arranged carefully, with all devotion and seriousness, on the shelf before it. Very slowly, like town officials who had respectfully ceased their transactions for a minute, the crows and sparrows began again, but sounding more distant now, even chastised, perhaps in comparison to the grand interlude of the train whistle. (Chaudhuri 272)

The everyday in Chaudhuri's novels appears in a reified form, with the gradual interruption of a consumer culture and industrialization. The private space is colonized by the capitalist culture, with the emergence of foreign products in the domestic space. The ordinary man becomes a part of the entire process of reification: "Here South Calcutta receded; homes, children, mothers, servants, were replaced by men in dirty overalls wandering about in the work shed. Without explanation, the machines hummed and rattled. In other factories nearby, machines hummed and rattled as well for the purposes of a tiny but persistent line of production" (Chaudhuri 373).

Chaudhuri's *The Immortals* presents another face of the everyday - the everyday here becomes the site of an alternative space for Nirmalya - the *flâneur* in the novel. The city of Bombay reveals its different faces to Nirmalya. The balcony from which Nirmalya sees the outside world, gives him the glimpse of the city and its alternative space: "From the balcony in front, you could see the sea, Chawpatty beach, the Marine Drive stretching and curving to the right: all that mattered in Bombay was before you; you did not need to know any more of the city - you took that fickle, flickering, glittering view to be the city itself" (Chaudhuri 46). The balcony offers Nirmalya a sense of repetitiveness of the everyday in the city of Bombay. Simultaneously he feels that the sea is "a negation of the city's human energies" (66). For Nirmalya the balcony serves as the front rows of a movie theatre and the flat stands as the inside of a cinema. Like Arun Kolatkar, who observed the streets of Bombay from a window of the Wayside Inn as the *flâneur*, Nirmalya also witnesses the outside world, where the interior and the exterior encroach into each other. The fleeting banality of the outside world offers him a sense of strangeness and the sea stands in front of him as a metaphor of an alternative everyday in the consumerism world, represented by his father's corporate life. The strangeness of the everyday comes to Nirmalya through the view from the balcony: "He went to the balcony, considered the view; much-praised, much-prized - more valuable than any of the artifacts inside" (193). The booming city and the corporate world sparkling with money do not attract Nirmalya - the quickly changing city of Bombay with its false promise of fulfillment

fails to offer him comfort. He rather turns to an alternatives everyday offered by the balcony of his house. Like the majority of the characters in Chaudhuri's novels Nirmalya too walks aimlessly in the city. As a *flâneur* he finds strangeness in the ordinary and witnesses larger socio-political reality embedded in the small symptoms of the everyday: "Once again, he'd gone out for a walk; he loved the conjunction of foreignness and familiarity in Bandra; he was impelled constantly by a sense of discovery but also of wonder and recognition" (295).

In *Odysseus Abroad* Chaudhuri presents the two major characters – Ananda and his uncle Rangamama – as walking in the streets of London, taking account of the surroundings, including the consumer-culture of the city, and discussing literature. Ananda observes that the streets of London are full of Indians; the Indians in London do business even on Sundays. These Indians have become part of London's commerce: "Sundays were a graveyard but for the Alis, Patels, Shahs, who (with Thatcher's collusion) were always open for business" (104). Chaudhuri in this novel represents ordinary everyday sights as revealing the dominant ideology, what he emphasized on his observation of the Kalighat paintings. The dominant British ideology of considering the West as superior to the Orient emerges obliquely in a portrait of Christ hung in the wall of an Indian restaurant in London. Ananda feels that the portrait transforms Christ into an ordinary figure: "the generic Christ, the timorous, blonde-haired, blue-eyed face upturned to the heavens, a lost middle-class student searching for guideline in an inhospitable world" (238).

Ananda feels that Christ, who was not a European and was from the Middle-East, has been portrayed through a Western representation: "The way you see him today is Western propaganda" (238). Ananda observes that even in James Bond movies the everyday indulgences of the Western protagonist stand for West's dominant ideology and its construction of the myth of West's superiority. Bond is often seen as being indulged on shaving – an everyday performance which bears many significances in the context of the Bond movie. In the Bond movie shaving becomes "an exhibition of his pheromonic powers", which is always seen as being cut short by some interruptions – sometimes a deadly insect or sometimes by a spy. Ananda observes that "this one recorded act of his humble daily toilette was made tantalizing by being never completed" (128). This everyday ritual in the Bond movie stands as a medium to exhibit how for Bond the act of saving the world is a priority over everything else. The projection of the everyday performance of shaving and the representation of its always being incomplete for some serious action in the Bond movie,



as Ananda observes, serve as a trope for constructing the myth of Western superiority.

### **Conclusion:**

In his collection of essays titled *Small Orange Flags*, there is an interview of Amit Chaudhuri given to Swagoto Ganguly and Anjum Katyal, on 12<sup>th</sup> August, 2003 in Calcutta, titled as "A Space Created: A Conversation". In this interview Chaudhuri speaks about "The consciousness that is inflected and threatened and endangered by the political ... The consciousness that registers and is permeated by the political" (Chaudhuri 43). He points out that small symptoms in consciousness may signal the emergence of changes: an entire life world has been witnessed by him as a portrayal of transformations brought about by globalization and capitalism in the upper middle class life: the common people's preference for the English medium public school, Archie comics, rock music, etc. In this interview Chaudhuri talks about an experience of sudden rupture happening around us, as a consequence of the changes brought about by post-economic liberalization. He says that the political is approached through the personal: "Big, sweeping changes take place 'out there' and are filtered through on to this one life that consequently lives differently or eats differently or dies differently" (Chaudhuri 46). It can be concluded that Chaudhuri considers the insignificant details of everyday life, traditionally considered banal and dull, as the carrier of socio-political realities. For Chaudhuri the everyday becomes a site of revelation, a space for knowledge production. Chaudhuri's writings project larger socio-political realities through the representation of the everyday: the everyday in Chaudhuri's narrative is the trajectory through the conceptualization of which the experiences of the present can be synthesized.

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