



Amit Chaudhuri's *Afternoon Raag*: A Study in Postcolonial Modernism

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Abstract: This article examines Amit Chaudhuri's *Afternoon Raag* as a significant work of postcolonial modernism. Departing from the grand historical narratives and overt political concerns that characterize much postcolonial fiction, the novel explores identity through memory, silence, music, and the rhythms of everyday life. Focusing on the experiences of an Indian student living in Oxford, the study demonstrates how personal recollections of Calcutta reveal the enduring psychological and cultural effects of colonialism. Employing close textual analysis informed by postcolonial theory and modernist criticism, the article investigates Chaudhuri's minimalist prose, fragmented narrative structure, and sustained attention to ordinary experience. Particular emphasis is placed on the symbolic and structural significance of the Hindustani raag, which functions as a medium of memory, cultural continuity, and emotional expression beyond the limitations of language. The analysis argues that Chaudhuri reconceptualizes postcolonial identity as fluid, hybrid, and deeply personal rather than fixed within nationalist discourse. By privileging silence, restraint, and introspection over historical spectacle, *Afternoon Raag* demonstrates that the most profound consequences of colonialism are often located within individual consciousness and everyday experience, thereby establishing a distinctive model of quiet postcolonial modernism.

Keywords: postcolonial modernism; postcolonial identity; memory; everyday life; Hindustani classical music; raag; silence; exile.



Introduction:

Amit Chaudhuri's *Afternoon Raag* represents a distinctive form of postcolonial fiction that departs from the grand historical narratives commonly associated with postcolonial literature. Rather than emphasizing political upheaval, national identity, or historical spectacle, the novel explores the subtle effects of colonialism through memory, silence, music, and everyday experience. The narrative follows an Indian student studying at Oxford whose consciousness constantly shifts between England and Calcutta, revealing the emotional and psychological consequences of displacement. Through its minimalist style and fragmented structure, *Afternoon Raag* presents postcolonial identity as fluid, introspective, and continuously evolving.

To understand Chaudhuri's novel, it is necessary to examine two important literary concepts: postcolonialism and modernism. Postcolonial criticism investigates the political, cultural, and psychological consequences of colonialism after the achievement of national independence. It examines not only the historical relationship between colonizer and colonized but also the enduring influence of colonial power on language, identity, and culture. Edward Said argues that Western representations of the East were deliberately constructed to justify imperial domination (Said). Similarly, Homi K. Bhabha introduces the concept of hybridity to explain the emergence of identities that exist between cultures rather than belonging exclusively to one national tradition (Bhabha 112-22).

Modernism, which developed during the early twentieth century, likewise transformed literary expression by rejecting conventional narrative techniques. Writers such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce experimented with fragmented narratives, shifting temporal structures, and stream of consciousness to represent the complexity of modern experience. Woolf maintains that fiction should represent life as it is actually experienced rather than merely recording external events ("Modern Fiction" 160).

Postcolonial writers soon discovered that modernist techniques effectively represented the fractured consciousness produced by colonial history. The discontinuous narrative structures of modernism reflected the divided identities of individuals negotiating multiple cultures. While

celebrated postcolonial novels such as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* employ magical realism and expansive historical narratives to recount the emergence of independent India, Chaudhuri adopts an entirely different literary strategy. His fiction deliberately avoids spectacular historical events in favour of quiet observation, personal memory, and ordinary experience. This article argues that *Afternoon Raag* exemplifies a distinctive form of postcolonial modernism in which silence, restraint, and everyday life become powerful vehicles for expressing postcolonial consciousness.

Objectives and Method of Study:

The primary objective of this study is to demonstrate that Amit Chaudhuri's *Afternoon Raag* constitutes a significant example of postcolonial modernism. The study pursues three specific objectives.

First, it examines how the novel's minimalist narrative style—its concise prose, fragmented memories, and strategic use of silence—constructs a conception of postcolonial identity that remains fluid and personal rather than fixed or nationalistic.

Second, it analyses the relationship between memory and everyday experience in order to demonstrate how colonial history continues to influence individual consciousness through ordinary domestic routines and personal recollections.

Third, it investigates the symbolic significance of Hindustani classical music, particularly the raag, as a cultural and aesthetic structure through which the protagonist negotiates memory, belonging, and identity beyond the limitations of language.

The study adopts the method of close textual analysis, paying careful attention to Chaudhuri's language, narrative structure, imagery, and symbolism. The analysis is informed by postcolonial theory, particularly Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity and Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, together with modernist theories of consciousness developed by Virginia Woolf and other modernist critics.

***Afternoon Raag* as Postcolonial Modernism:**

Amit Chaudhuri's *Afternoon Raag* exemplifies a quiet and reflective form of postcolonial modernism. The novel follows a young Indian student pursuing higher studies at Oxford



University. Unlike many protagonists in postcolonial fiction, he does not experience dramatic political conflict or overt racial hostility. Instead, he occupies a condition of quiet exile. Although physically situated in England, his emotional and psychological world continually returns to Calcutta through memory and sensory experience. Consequently, he inhabits an intermediate cultural space, belonging completely neither to India nor to Britain.

The novel deliberately avoids dramatic action. There are no revolutionary movements, political demonstrations, or sensational family conflicts. Instead, Chaudhuri constructs the narrative through apparently insignificant moments: preparing tea, observing the afternoon sunlight, recalling familiar sounds, and participating in restrained conversations with English acquaintances. These ordinary experiences gradually reveal the protagonist's emotional displacement and fragmented identity.

The novel's modernist qualities emerge through its emphasis on interior consciousness rather than external action. Its fragmented structure allows memories of Calcutta to interrupt present experiences in Oxford, producing a narrative that moves freely between past and present. This fragmentation is not merely an aesthetic experiment but also a representation of postcolonial subjectivity. The protagonist's divided consciousness reflects the continuing influence of colonial history upon personal identity, demonstrating how cultural belonging remains unstable and continually negotiated.

Discussion:

One of the novel's most significant achievements is its emphasis on everyday life rather than grand national history. The protagonist's existence in Oxford unfolds through a sequence of ordinary routines that acquire profound significance because they are continually mediated by memories of Calcutta. Everyday activities become repositories of cultural memory and emotional attachment. The preparation of tea, for example, evokes recollections of home and reveals how displacement transforms even the simplest domestic rituals into acts of remembrance. Chaudhuri thereby suggests that the postcolonial condition is experienced not only through political change but also through the subtle rhythms of everyday existence. This emphasis on ordinary life



reflects Michel de Certeau's argument that individuals negotiate larger social and historical structures through the practices of everyday living (de Certeau 29–42).

Equally significant is the novel's use of memory, silence, and narrative fragmentation in constructing the protagonist's identity. Rather than following a chronological sequence, the narrative shifts continually between the present in Oxford and memories of Calcutta. Sensory experiences—a familiar sound, an unexpected smell, or a passing emotion—trigger recollections that interrupt the linear movement of the narrative. Such fragmentation exemplifies a characteristic modernist technique while simultaneously representing the divided consciousness of the postcolonial subject. Identity is presented not as a unified or stable entity but as a mosaic of memories and experiences assembled across different cultural spaces.

Silence functions as another important narrative strategy. Much of the emotional significance of the novel resides in what remains unspoken. The protagonist repeatedly struggles to articulate experiences that resist translation into English. His inability to communicate the emotional significance of the afternoon raag to his English friend Jane symbolizes a broader cultural distance that language alone cannot overcome. Silence therefore becomes an expressive mode rather than a narrative absence. It reveals the inadequacy of colonial language to convey indigenous emotional and cultural experiences and quietly critiques the lingering influence of colonial discourse.

The Hindustani raag constitutes the novel's central aesthetic and symbolic principle. Traditionally, a raag is a melodic framework designed to evoke a specific emotional atmosphere at a particular time of day. Chaudhuri employs this indigenous musical form as the structural and emotional foundation of the novel. The title itself, *Afternoon Raag*, indicates that music provides the key to understanding the protagonist's emotional landscape. The raag serves as his most intimate connection to India, preserving cultural memory despite physical displacement.

Moreover, the novel itself resembles the structure of a musical performance. Rather than advancing through a conventional plot, it develops gradually through recurring memories, subtle emotional variations, and carefully modulated shifts in mood. Like a classical raag, the narrative privileges atmosphere over action and emotional resonance over dramatic conflict. In doing so,



Chaudhuri creates a distinctly Indian form of literary modernism that integrates indigenous aesthetics with modernist narrative experimentation.

Ultimately, *Afternoon Raag* presents postcolonial identity as deeply personal, fluid, and introspective. Through restrained prose, fragmented memories, and the symbolic richness of Hindustani classical music, Chaudhuri challenges conventional assumptions that postcolonial literature must depend upon historical spectacle or overt political engagement. Instead, he demonstrates that the most enduring consequences of colonialism are often experienced within the intimate spaces of memory and everyday life.

Conclusion:

This study has demonstrated that Amit Chaudhuri's *Afternoon Raag* represents a compelling example of what may be described as "quiet" postcolonial modernism. Rejecting the grand narratives of nationalism and political history, the novel creates an alternative literary space in which the postcolonial condition is explored through memory, silence, and the ordinary experiences of everyday existence. Its minimalist prose, fragmented narrative structure, and sustained attention to interior consciousness reveal the subtle psychological consequences of colonial displacement.

The protagonist's continual movement between Oxford and Calcutta illustrates the fluid and hybrid nature of postcolonial identity. Rather than presenting identity as stable or nationally defined, Chaudhuri portrays it as an ongoing process shaped by memory, cultural negotiation, and emotional attachment. Most importantly, the incorporation of the Hindustani raag provides the novel with an indigenous aesthetic framework that challenges conventional Western narrative structures while expressing forms of belonging and loss that exceed the limits of language.

Afternoon Raag therefore demonstrates that postcolonial literature need not depend upon dramatic political events to articulate colonial experience. Instead, Chaudhuri reveals that the deepest and most enduring effects of colonialism are often found in the quiet spaces of individual consciousness, where memory, music, and silence become powerful forms of cultural expression.



Scope of the Study:

The present study is limited to an examination of *Afternoon Raag* through the theoretical framework of postcolonial modernism. It does not attempt a comparative analysis of Chaudhuri's broader fictional oeuvre, nor does it undertake a detailed study of Hindustani classical music beyond its symbolic function within the novel. Consequently, several avenues remain open for future research.

Subsequent studies may examine the development of Chaudhuri's minimalist aesthetics across his later novels or compare his narrative technique with that of other contemporary writers such as Anita Desai and Kazuo Ishiguro. Further interdisciplinary research may also investigate the role of music, painting, cinema, and other non-verbal artistic forms in articulating postcolonial consciousness beyond the limitations of linguistic representation.

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