HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

IMMORTALS

Amit Chaudhuri

The Immortals (2009)

Story Amit Chaudhuri's fifth novel*, The Immortals*, is set in Bombay during the 1970s and 80s and charts the fortunes of two families connected by music: the Lals and the Senguptas. Shyam Lal, the son of a famous singer, teaches music to support his family. One of his students is Malika Sengupta, who is married to a rich businessman and is more concerned with luxury than melody. The novel more or less follows the story of Malika's son, Nirmalya, a somewhat comical teenager. Nirmalya has recently discovered the philosophy of transcendence and also begins to take lessons from Shyam. Unlike his mother, however, Nirmalya is appalled by what he sees as the commercialisation in Shyam's teaching and wants to defend its traditional 'purity.' Nirmalya complains that Shyam is not perfecting his own talent and furthering the tradition he has inherited from his father; instead, he is pandering to the whims of his affluent students, such as Nirmalya's mother, who is herself an accomplished singer. Slowly, Shyam's family and friends insinuate themselves into the life of the wealthy Senguptas, borrowing money and asking favours. Shyam's fortunes wax and then wane precipitously, while Nirmalya's father retires and loses his corporate privileges. In the end Nirmalya goes to England to study philosophy.

As with his other novels, nothing very dramatic occurs in the story, not even a dose of romantic love. The two families interact, there are situations that hint at financial disaster or sexual misconduct, but they never materialise. Life runs on in smooth, well-behaved grooves. Both these families, though very different, come from the urban, educated and westernised elite, who are the visible face of India. They manage the economy and the arts, which have put India on the global stage. The servants and labourers remain in the background, where they face gnawing hunger and the destruction wreaked by a powerful monsoon. Other characters make brief appearances: a British businessman who 'loves' India for its 'colours', a mournful musician who 'kept himself in the background' and a bad painter who makes money by selling 'pictures of smoky huts and indecisive village maidens.' Despite (or because of) this lack of drama, the novel stays with the reader as an exploration of questions that most of us have asked ourselves at some point in our own unremarkable lives.

Themes

Art and money Although Chaudhuri's novels flow along at a leisurely pace, without sensational content, they probe serious issues. In the case of *The Immortals*, the main question he explores is the relationship between art and money, between culture and the practical demands of our mundane lives. In this novel, we have an old tradition of singing that appears to be disappearing in the face of more modern entertainment media. The 'immortals' of the title are thus the survivors, the great singers of the past who transcend historical trends. The author, himself a talented classical musician, makes fun of the commercialism in art, especially in the figure of a painter who sells pictures of cliched village scenes to the Bombay elite. But Chaudhuri does not simply condemn wealth as the reason for this cultural decline. Instead, the novel moves back and forth between the everyday flow of events and the crystallisation of them into the higher forms of experience we call 'art.'

Friendship Beneath its vigorous exploration of these intellectual questions, the novel also highlights the positive joys of friendship in its many forms. There is a great deal of companionship, yet not even a whiff of sexual encounters, which might seem odd when its main character is a teenager. Instead, Nirmalya has a warm relationship with his parents, not love exactly because he is too withdrawn, but a comfortable rapport. In the author's words, it was 'an old and familiar friendship, a trust that had been forged probably in some other birth.' There is also the deep admiration and loyalty of the music student for the teacher, or guru. And in the beginning, when Nirmalya is only seven years old, there are several scenes of his bubbly friendship with other boys his age.

Nostalgia Like much of Chaudhuri's fiction, this novel is suffused with an atmosphere of nostalgia. There is regret that the old singing style is no longer popular, that the old stories are being replaced by soap operas on television and that the old buildings of Bombay are being erased by high-rises. Most of this lament is reserved for the unwelcome trends in the music tradition, especially for the replacement of the *tanbura* (a four-stringed instrument) by the guitar. The traditional *tanbura* is said to sound 'like a god humming to itself.' But there is a similar feeling of loss when Nirmalya finds that his favourite coffee shop has been swept away by a chain of shops. In the author's quiet prose, this story is an elegy to a slowly disappearing India.

Characters

Shyam Lal Shyam Lal, son of a great singer of North Indian classical music, makes his living not by performing but by teaching. He is a practical man, or perhaps just uninspired one, who comments that 'one cannot practice art on an empty stomach.' He decides to teach the popular songs, 'the musical currency of the day', and to pursue the classical forms in his retirement, sometime in the future.

Malika Sengupta Malika Sengupta, the wife of a wealthy businessman, was once a talented singer who has sublimated her musical ambitions to the demands of motherhood, without apparent conflict. She is not unhappy with her compromise, but a hint of disappointment lingers in her recollections.

Nirmalya Sengupta Nirmalya Sengupta, Malika's teenage son, is the central character. While living off the affluence of his father, he is critical of the corrosive effects of money on the arts. He takes music lessons from Lal, but his deeper interest lies in the study of transcendental philosophy. He is a likable if overly critical teenager, through whom the author appears to present his own ideas.

Apurva Sengupta Apurva Sengupta is Nirmalya's father, an ambitious man who rises to become the managing director of a company. With each new promotion, he acquires new things, including a luxurious flat. He conforms, with relish, to the norms of the corporate world, using its risible language and holding many 'drinks parties' for his partners. He does have some principles, though, and he refuses to play golf with his partners.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

MALIKA (Domestic)

Character Mallika Sengupta is mother to Nirmalya and wife to a wealthy industrialist in Bombay. She is a Bengali, who feels somewhat out of place in Bombay, where Hindi, Marathi and English are spoken. She comes from a small town with little pretensions but was found to possess a beautiful voice. As a teenage girl, she entertained old ladies in drawing rooms, although some found her voice 'old-fashioned.' Her talent went undeveloped, because she was a girl, and so she accepted the offer of marriage from Mr Sengupta. 'She wisely accepted his offer, largely because she decided, shrewdly, that life with him would allow her to pursue her singing.' That, however, did not happen. She ended up sublimating her musical ambitions to the demands of being a wife and a mother.

Activities Mallika spends most of her time in the house, managing servants, waiting on her son and husband. When time permits, she gets out her harmonium and practices her singing or takes lessons from a teacher. She also spends evenings playing the 'perfect hostess' when her industrialist husband has his business partners over.

Illustrative moments

Domestic Mallika's musical ambitions are thwarted by the domestic routine she throws herself into after marriage. The absolute control that her domestic duties maintain over her music is illustrated in an early chapter. It is early afternoon, she has finished her music practice on the harmonium and waits for her son to come home for lunch. The author puts it this way: 'She focused on the boy returning from school. She'd feel an inward restlessness, as if a job left undone, until he'd come back and eaten. The music was a constant trickle in her life, not allowed to disturb her routine; in fact, the routine went on, and now and then, it paused decorously to make time for the music, at which point

the routine was consigned to someone else's hands—the cook, or the maid; but it wasn't allowed to stop.'

Anxious Mallika is often anxious, lacks confidence and seems ready to believe the worst in any situation. A good illustration of this occurs when her son, Nirmalya, is bitten by mosquitoes and falls ill with dengue fever, Mallika is distraught. She feels guilty because she left him in the car, without closing the windows. Dengue fever can, she has read, permanently damage the heart. The doctor assures her that the condition is congenital, was there from birth, and that she should not accuse herself of neglect. But still she feels terrible. Her servant tries to console her, and Mallika briefly wonders if she would change places with this poor woman living in a slum if she could. At least, she wouldn't worry so much, she thinks. No, she admits, I wouldn't want to change places with her. 'But she would have liked to have had her easy, taking-for-granted attitude toward her four children. She would have liked that, but she knew she couldn't have it.'

Practical Despite her thwarted musical ambitions, Mallika makes peace with her compromise of married life. She realises that she didn't really want to become a famous singer, travelling all over the country giving performances, staying in hotels, meeting all sorts of undesirable people. This practical side of her nature is demonstrated in a scene following an unwanted sexual advance from a music impresario named Shukla. As the author explains, 'she knew she could have been famous, but opted for the life of a Managing Director's wife. It wasn't only because she wanted the easy way out; it was also because she couldn't deal with the likes of Shukla…She knew, after all, she'd made the right decision…She didn't want to be a hermit. She loved life. When her husband became Managing Director she found that she just discovered existence. She'd go to the sari exhibition and contemplate buying a Kancheepuram [expensive, handprinted sari]. She'd lose herself in the red and deep blues of a sari.'

NIRMALYA (Rebellious)

Character Nirmalya Sengupta is the son of son of a rich man, who has the leisure to indulge in reading philosophy and take singing lessons and think about the 'higher' things in life, while his friends seek jobs with salaries. He can walk about the streets of Bombay and hang out in expensive hotels and restaurants in a torn kurta and sandals, while others dress to gain respectability. In fact, he makes it a point to turn up at his parents' dinner parties in a dishevelled state. But he is only fifteen or sixteen years old, and we forgive him his self-importance and irresponsibility as the natural qualities of an adolescent. His reading fires his imagination, to admire the transcendental things in life and scorn the squalid practicalities. He is critical of classically-trained musicians who spurn tradition and teach the wives of wealthy men to earn a living. He is similarly upset with his own mother (one of his guru's students) for the same reason: that she is contributing to the decay of tradition. He is fired by the ideas of philosophy, rather than the demands of the workplace, and, as his mother gently points out, he has a tendency to turn 'simple things into 'portentous adventures.' For all his teenage faults, we like this dreamy young boy. He is a loner and avoids boys of his own age. He even refuses to take part in the great Hindu festivals because he dislikes the recent addition of fire crackers and sparklers. He prefers the serenity of his own mind, of his own home and even (shock horror for a teenager) of his parents.

Activities The teenage Nirmalya spends most of his time reading, practicing music and wandering about Bombay. He goes to coffee shops and book stores, always with torn clothesand a well-thumbed copy of Will Durant's *The Story of Philosophy* in his back pocket.

Illustrative moments

Rebellious Nirmalya's rebellious nature simmers away beneath the surface of even scene, growing steadily as the comforts his enjoys from his father's business increase. One scene, in an early chapter, displays his puritanical streak that clashes with his parents' life-style. His father has brought him and his mother to an expensive restaurant on the Bombay seafront to take afternoon tea. After sitting down at a specially reserved table with a fine view over the harbous, Nirmalya declares, with a shake of the head, 'I can't eat here.' He has seen a scavenger boy, about his age, defecating on the seafront. Nirmalya explains that he won't eat there until Shyam, his music guru, who comes from a poorer family, can also eat there. His parents, ever indulgent, are dismayed but rise and leave with their son, although Mrs Sengupta glanced back at the tray of cakes with disappointment.

Withdrawn The philosophical Nirmalya is also a reserved and withdrawn character, almost ascetic in his disdain for wealth and its luxuries. A good illustration of this quality is described when his father buys a new luxury flat in a high-rise, and Nirmalya wants to stay behind in the old house, which 'faced the sea with its roaring waves, yet seemed serene to him.' As the author elaborates, 'Nirmalya felt bitter and unhappy at the idea of moving house, and wandered sullenly about the flat in La Terrasse[the old house] as if he were looking for a hiding-place in which to secrete himself.' It is this interior quality that, paradoxically, draws us to him. We feel that we are let inside him, where no one else is allowed.

SHYAM LAL (Uncertain)

Character Shyam Lal is a key and complex character in this gently flowing novel. He is the singing teacher of Malika, Nirmalya's mother, but he is also the son of a legend of north Indian classical music and should, by tradition, be performing instead of teaching. However, the popularity of film songs from Bollywood (the novel is set in 1980s Bombay) have forced him to downscale his artistic ambitions and 'deal in the musical currency of the day' by taking the wives of wealthy husbands as students. He is a practical man, or perhaps just an uninspired one, who comments that 'one cannot practice art on an empty stomach.' He decides to teach the popular songs and to pursue the classical forms in his retirement, sometime in the future. When he becomes a tutor for Nirmalya, who is a musical purist in sharp contrast to Shyam Lal's 'practical' approach, the novel moves into a dramatic tension. Now, Shyam Lal's modernity is pitted against Nirmalya's tradition. Through the character of Shyam Lal, the author (himself a gifted musician who has performed in many places around the world) explores the dynamic behind the gradual decline in the fortunes of Indian classical music. This cultural change underpins the novel with its elegiac note.

Activities Shyam Lal is a music teacher who goes to the houses of rich families to tutor wives or children. His journeys by bus and by walking, and his trips to various parts of Bombay prompts him to reminice about his past. He sometimes goes with his brother-in-law, also a musician. Through flashbacks, we also glimpse something of his childhood as the son of a great musician, whom he worshipped almost as a saint.

Illustrative moments

Practical One of the dominant elements of Shyam Lal's character, and one which forms a clear contrast with both his father and with Nirmalya, is that he is a practical man. He sees no shame in taking up the new electronic keyboard, which did in fact infiltrate north Indian classical music in the 1980s, and in singing songs from the cinema. This attitude is expressed most clearly in a conversation with Nirmalya during one of their lessons. The young Nirmalya asks him, 'Shyamji [a respectful form of address], why don't you sing classical more often? Why don't you sing fewer ghazals [popular forms] and sing more at classical concerts?' The author then writes, 'Shyamji was unimpeachably polite and his tone patient. *'*Baba*'* [an affectionate term for a younger man], 'let me establish myself so that I don't think of money anymore. Then I can devote myself completely to art. You cannot practice art on an empty stomach.' This may seem like a reasonable point of view, but to the purist Nirmalya it is a betrayal of tradition. Having heard his teacher, Nirmalya says to himself, 'Here was a man in a loose white kurta and pyjama; a man who seemed to have no idea or, or time for, inspiration. A man who undertook his teaching, his singing, almost as—a job.' This final word is said with a sneer, which makes Nirmalya even less likable than Shyam Lal.

Uncertain Throughout the novel, Shyam Lal is portrayed as a man without a plan and without a clear sense of himself. There is an echo of this 'wandering' in his statement (quoted above) that he will realise his artistic potential in retirement. In another context, the author says that Shyam Lal 'fitted neither the model of the Eastern artist, nor that of the Western musician. The Eastern artist was part religious figure, the Western part rebel; and Shyamji seemed to be neither.' This unsettled, floating quality of his character is illustrated very subtly in a scene that occurs early in the novel. He and his family are engaged in a late-night ritual, and by midnight Shyam Lal falls asleep and has a dream. He dreams of his father, the great figure of classical music whom he will never emulate. He sees him 'as a portrait, hanging in a reddish light.' The dream continues for a long time, changing shape, showing various stages of Shyam Lal's childhood and later life. When he awakes, it is dawn and everyone has gone. He is alone. The shifting shapes of the dream and his morning loneliness represent the uncertainty of Shyam Lal's character.