

***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 (it should be said) is 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.

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' in 'the 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 gold with his partners.

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 clichéd 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 lot 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.