Chapter-7

The Immortals

This chapter aims to explore music as a metaphor of culture in *The Immortals* (2009). Amit Chaudhuri utilizes music, foods, and clothes as a metaphor in his novels to show how trans-valuation of values is taking place in the matter-driven modern society. He builds the narrative around the *ragas* of music to show the difficulty of those artists who are struggling to find their right place in the fashion of popular art culture. While lesser writers obsess over the heat and dust, Chaudhuri charts the by-ways of the Indian soul, and thus marks in the pantheon of contemporary writers. His works reflect the Indian values coated in Bengali sensibility. This chapter intends to assess how music reflects culture.

Music is also a form of communication using abstract symbols to transfer meaning. Music is generally accepted for constructing realities about life and culture. It plays a vital role in constructing realities. As a metaphor for communicating, music provides a link between the values and intentional activities for understating culture. Indian classical music which blends our divine sense and discipline is an act of worship and not the scholarly show of the mastery on the techniques of *raga*. It is based on melody and rhythm, not on harmony, musical tones and intonation that are the nuts and bolts of popular music. The convention of Indian
traditional music has a long history which asserts its origin in the *Vedic mantra* of Hindu temples. Its roots are spiritual and therefore, it could be divine discipline on the path of self-realization. Music is *Nada Brahma* which means "Sound is God" and for this reason it is capable of elevating human consciousness and culture to the realm of the eternal and unchanging essence of the Universe.

It is the eternal sense of Indian classical music which inspires Chaudhuri most, and his preoccupation with music can be seen in his novels such as *Freedom Song, Afternoon Raag*, and *The Immortals*. His love of music can be clearly visualized in *The Immortals*. He puts high premium on the music by treating it as a means to achieve sublimity and immortality. He is personally interested in North Indian Classical music and has a few albums to his credit. Though his love of music is intense, he does not claim to be a professional. He affirms this in an interview with Sumana R. Ghosh:

> Music is an important constituent of the culture or family I grew up in.... However, I discovered classical music for myself.... I've become interested in Indian Classical music as a subject.... I've become interested in music and the world of capital, music, art and the marketplace. But I have to say that I'm not conscious of the analogies between my narrative technique and Indian classical music. (176-77)

*The Immortals* is a story of two families: one luxuriating in a new world of corporate affluence and the other is getting on by the old world of musical tradition. Together, they are joined by a common, day-to-day
pursuit of music. Music is the thread that ties the novel. The setting of the novel is Bombay during the 1970s and early 1980s. Mallika Sengupta, the central character of the novel, married to a high-profile executive, has never pursued a career in music her musical interests are no more than the casual hobby of a rich woman.

Chaudhuri, himself, a composer and musician has got the grand exposition ability of the world he creates. Even a long journey on the turf of literature has never been able to deviate his interest and experience with music. This connection between music and Chaudhuri is reflected in all his novels. It is not a mere coincidence but a fact that his novels draw on music for cultural sustenance. Chaudhuri has grown up in an environment where music was traditionally rooted and thus inherited by him. In the beginning, his interest in the music was developed by his mother and she became the first music teacher for him. Thus, we can say music is in his blood and vein. Of course, his love for music can be seen in his writing, which is a cultural metaphor for understanding society and culture. After an extensive silence of six years he created a new album "Found Music" and *The Immortals* (2009). In one of his recent interviews, Chaudhuri states that:

I suppose I meant I wanted to escape music lessons - not music itself, which I always loved, from ever since I can recall. I used to sing 'Bol Radha bol sangam hoga ki nah’ all the time when I was four years old. At the age of seven or eight, I was humming the ‘BeeGees’ ‘Gotta Get a Message to You’ and The Who's 'Substitute'. But I was never one for
discipline or serious, regimented study, and somy mother's efforts to teach me Tagore songs didn't bear fruit. At12, though, I began to learn guitar chords informally, and was soon writing songs and performing for a few friends. At 15, exposure to Natya Sangeet on Bombay's local television channel and to the 78rpm recordings of Vishmadev Chatterjee and Sachin Deb Burman— not to speak of discovering Kishori Amonkar on a programme called 'Pratibha ani Pratima'— made me begin to want to learn Indian classical music. Then, in 1983, I was off to England, where I practised like a demon and didn't listen to Western popular music again till 1999. *(The Hindu, December, 25-2010)*

For Chaudhuri, writing and music require different sensibilities. One is more about observing things and reflecting on life and the other, perhaps, more about having a sense of rhythm, a certain serenity — and ultimately an ear for music. He further adds:

...by 1982 I was deeply committed to Indian classical music, through which I became increasingly involved with new-found and rather fierce notions of authenticity. So, I experienced my 'Indianness' as something that expressed itself powerfully through Hindustani classical music. I also had a low tolerance for the synthesised music - including, especially, disco.... I began to listen to my record collection of Western music again, and noticed how Jimi Hendrix's
recording of the blues overlapped with the pentatonic raga.

(The Hindu, December, 25- 2010)

Chaudhuri writes about Bombay and the music beautifully. The employment of music in his novels is not entirely a new venture. There has been a strong tradition of music in fictional narratives. We find music occupying a significant place in Salman Rushdie. He wrote about rock music and Bombay in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (2000), Vikram Seth wrote about Western classical music and Europe in *An Equal Music* (1999), and Ameen Merchant's *The Silent Raga* (2007). The narrative of all these novels is inextricably woven either with Indian Classical ragas or with western musical notes. It is, however, worth noticing that if Rushdie talks about rock music, Seth deals with Western classical European music, and Merchant asserts women's point of view through Carnatic music, Chaudhuri utilizes music in the society and its marketplace on the other.

Throughout the novel many characters are introduced with their passion for and love of music. The main character, Nirmalya Sengupta, is the teenage scion of a corporate father who enjoys all the paraphernalia of the Indian *nouveau riche*. (new rich). Unlike many teenagers, he is trying to find his own way with the judgmental zeal that only the privileged can display. With his long hair, grungy goatee, torn *kurta* and earmarked copy of Will Durant's *Story of Philosophy*, Nirmalya is a classicist; he dreams of classical music and softly condemns his mother Mallika, an excellent singer, for "selling out" to commerce over art. He is also more than a little naive and spoiled: "Nirmalya had never known want; and so he couldn't
understand those who said, or implied, they couldn't do without what they already had". (Amit Chaudhuri, 45)

His guru Shyamji is from the Brahmin caste who is a singer of 1980s in Bombay who makes a living off the wealthy students to whom he gives voice lessons. His father was a famous classical musician, but the overwhelming popularity of film-songs forced him to downscale his artistic inheritance. To survive in a competitive world he took to tutoring and enabling the dreams of the wealthy. The story centers on one of his pupils, Mallika, who has a beautiful voice, and her son, Nirmalaya, who forms a unique bond with Shyamji. Nirmalaya might claim he "sold his soul" by straddling the two distinct worlds of classical versus popular music. The juxtaposition of Nirmalaya and Shyamji sets up an intriguing premise: who should be granted more respect, the "upper born," artistically-gifted guru or the newly-wealthy who are now, for all intents and purposes, his employers? What is the relationship between commerce and art and how does it "play out" in reality? Mallika - Nirmalaya's mother - ponders this dichotomy:

Mallika had wanted recognition, that pure woebegone desire for areward for her gift had accompanied her life from the start but never overwhelmed it; but she hadn't wanted to dirty her hands in the music world; she's wanted to preserve the prestige of being, at once, an artist and the wife of a successful executive. (68)

There are flaws. The greatest is that, at times, the demand for familiarity with Indian music - particularly classical music - can be
disconcerting or even downright frustrating to the uninformed reader. She takes voice lessons from a series of tutors, one of whom is Shyam Lal. Although the son of a classical singer of legendary fame, Shyamji deals in "the musical currency of the day... the songs with which a middle class of faithful, hardworking husbands and vivacious housewives expressed its dreams" (88). Classical music, he gently points out, cannot be practiced on an empty stomach (88). When Mallika's son Nirmalya asks Shyamji to teach him classical music, the tutor is nonplussed, but does his best for the boy.

Nirmalya has all the puritanical zeal of a privileged adolescent. While his friends drift into money-making professions, he walks the streets of Bombay in a torn kurta, carrying a well-thumbed copy of Will Durant's *Story of Philosophy* and dreaming of purity in art. Meanwhile, his father retires and loses many of his corporate privileges.

*The Immortals* is about two families and their very different relationships with the world of commerce. Chaudhuri's portrayal of the attractive but often empty life of corporate executives in pre-boom India is masterly, especially because it refuses to moralise. However, *The Immortals* is a sustained meditation on the relationship of art and commerce. Again and again, it asks whether the two can have any legitimate connection but never proffers any simple answers. The theme, explored mainly through the reveries of Nirmalya, could easily have become precious.

In fact, it is handled with great sensitivity and wit. The narrator is always ready to reduce Nirmalya's superior thoughts, but never questions
the importance of the young man's fundamental concerns. A devotee of
Indian classical music, the boy is intent on defending this tradition against
the threat of commercialism. As it happens, *ragas* run in the blood of
both the protagonist of *The ImmORTals* and its author.

Chaudhuri is not only a devotee of Hindustani music, but also a
professional musician with several releases to his credit. He sings his own
compositions on an experimental album cheekily titled "This Is Not
Fusion." Chaudhuri is trained equally in Indian classical music and
Western pop and rock but he is sharply against the chaotic fusion-music-
culture which is disturbing the purity of aesthetics. He is not against the
Western tradition of music rather his rage is against the harsh musical
overlap.

Like his main character, Chaudhuri was tutored by a songstress
mother and a beloved Rajasthani *guru*. And the biographical symmetries
don't stop with the music. Chaudhuri lends Nirmalya his own health
condition, a heart murmur, his own cosmopolitan identity as a Bengali
raised in Bombay — now Mumbai — and schooled in London and the
addresses of his own youth. The Senguptas retire from a luxury high-rise
in downtown Bombay to Bandra, which at the time was on the frontier of
the feverishly growing city, a suburb of churches and gulmohar trees
where Chaudhuri also lived. But none of these parallels protect Nirmalya
from the wry, knowing authorial tone that makes the book so pleasurable,
despite the sparseness of its plot. Chaudhuri, a maestro of intimation, then
shifts the focus:

I can't eat here, Nirmalya said, shaking his head slowly, the
boyish face little more than a child's in spite of the moustache, full of inexplicable hurt, the eyes almost tearful. 'I can't eat here until Shyamji is able to eat here.' His parents indulgently follow him out with a conviction that they were doing the only logical and admissible thing . . . Mrs. Sengupta glancing tolerantly, without emotion, at the tray of cakes. (79)

Shyamji is the boy's teacher, respected but also judged by him for squandering his artistic inheritance as the son of a gifted classical musician. Shyamji must earn a living, so he neglects his own career to tutor the rich — including Nirmalya's mother, a talented singer who has settled for being the dilettante wife of a business executive. Shyamji comes with a clan of accompanists who press the Senguptas for loans but also befriend them. Gently and elusively, like the glow of a firefly, Chaudhuri's irony lights up the complex status negotiations in the dark space that exists between the two families. Are Nirmalya and his mother disciples or employers? Who is due more respect, the Brahmin teacher or his students, who are of lower caste but are clearly his social betters? Was it the sight of a boy possibly defecating outside or a democratic concern for his guru's dining options that made Nirmalya leave the Leela Penta Hotel?

It is possible that he rejects the hotel before it can reject his guru. Even so, we guess that his sensitivity may be another affectation, like the long hair and grungy goatee he ultimately cuts off in London or his public transport habit in Bombay, "his way of briefly, innocently, taking on a
disguise, of insinuating himself into the life of the multitude." (98)

Chaudhuri is clear-sighted about what is closest to him, and he is candid without being cynical about the class of aspirants who have made India a global economic player. *The Immortals* confirms his reputation as a gifted miniaturist. It is an interesting look at classical music in 1980s India. Specifically, classical music is the framework through which Chaudhuri discusses the change in culture in India during the time period, where classical music was once revered. It can be seen how pop music is encroaching on its status, to the point where people don't necessarily want to learn classical music anymore. Western culture is infecting Bombay, and the wealthy residents of the city welcome it with open arms. The entire novel is a commentary on cultural change, whether through art, music, or philosophy. His descriptions are incredibly vivid; one can see India when he closes his eyes. That is to say, how truly Chaudhuri depicted Bombay of the 1980s, and how much he managed to convey through just his writing. His attention to detail is masterful, and as a result, this is a great pick for those interested in learning more about India in a time when its culture was transforming.

This was an interesting look at the changing of a culture through the prism of classical music. A fifth of the way through this novel, one of its characters, a serious-minded teenage boy called Nirmalya, has a presentiment that he is about to figure in a narrative with a particular theme: "It was as if ... he was now to be caught up, if not as a player then as bystander, in a story of ambition; he wasn't sure whose - perhaps his own, but if not his entirely, then his parents', or other people's, or could it
be even the city's itself?" (98). Indeed, it could be. The city in question is Bombay, whose ambition is visualised, over the book's chronological span of several years in the 1980s, in passages that observe new building on land reclaimed from the sea, or luxury apartment blocks sprouting incongruously in the middle of treeless wastelands.

Nirmalya lives in one such luxury apartment thanks to his business executive father, Apurva Sengupta, whose job furnishes the family with chauffeur-driven cars and tea clubs. His mother, Mallika, is a talented singer, but her voice is not of the timbre currently fashionable. Her music teacher, Shyamji, the son of a revered Indian classical musician, shuttles between the worlds of serious and popular music. Soon Nirmalya, too, begins to learn from Shyamji, who becomes his guru.

So the stage is set for the story of ambition. Mallika's musical gift is untrammeled by traffic with commerce, and to threaten her family life by pursuing "personal ambition" is unthinkable to her. Nirmalya - who, as it is ironically put, has "recently become aware of the fact that he existed" and is voraciously consuming philosophy - thinks his teacher ought to devote himself seriously to his high calling with no thought of material gain; but Shyamji thinks he can do both, teaching and playing "the lighter forms" now, and retiring to what is serious at some indefinite, ever-receding point in the future. "You cannot practise art on an empty stomach," he complains.

The city of Bombay is also figurated as a character by the narrative voice, which, when not aligned with the consciousness of one character or another, often implies a generalised community of gossip. There are
appeals to what is "seen by many", and statements are justified "according to unofficial information". Ascribable to this communal perspective, perhaps, are the sententious opinions that occasionally interrupt scenes, such as this about the Sengupta's maid: "the poor have a special ability, after all, to understand the torments of their employers, to empathise with them"; or when it is said of a flower arranger that she has "the efficient but somewhat provisional air of a working woman". (106)

An unusual kind of omniscience also regularly enables the narrator, or narrative collective, to observe and report on what is said to be happening "imperceptibly"; the style can at times be creakingly ugly, particularly in the book's overused neither-nor or both-and constructions. On the other hand, there are many sweet felicities, as when Nirmalya, enduring a treadmill test at the doctor's, is said to be "stoic in his obscure errand"; when we are introduced to "an old man in white who sat on the carpet in a way that made it seem he could see all the way to the horizon"; or when the voice poses questions directly to the reader: "Recognition is partly imagination, isn't it?" (98)

However, Chaudhuri, himself a composer and musician, excels in the passages devoted to music, "the miracle of song and its pleasure"(7). The scenes of characters practising in private are subtly thrilling; and there are also more general arguments about the role of music in east and west, in the marketplace and in society. At one point, Shyamji remarks on the increasing popularity in India of the easily domesticable western guitar, in contrast to the traditional four-stringed tanpura, which is described thus: "its sound shocked you every time you heard it -like a god
humming to itself, its vibrations difficult to describe or report on, the solipsism of the heavens" (7) ... at another point, when Nirmalya is playing the same instrument, it is described with marvellous compression simply as aloof sentinel" (7).

Deliberately, Chaudhuri is contrasting the mere quotidian change of events with a kind of timeless, otherworldly stasis to which his musician characters aspire in their art. The "immortals" of the title are those who have achieved such sublimation; there are some singers whose voices are so melodious that they bring to existence, for their listeners, the fictive world of kinnars, gods, and apsaras, from which they seem to be briefly visiting us ... their music brings to this world the message of that other one, to which they'll eventually return:

Thus, it is visualized that The Immortals is a quiet evocation of everyday life in India. Salman Rushdie has pointed out that India - in the literary imagination - is a country of magnitude and multitude, a "non-stop assault on the senses, the emotions, the imagination and the spirit". Amit Chaudhuri makes brief reference to such a "mythical composite of colour and smell" but goes on to show that his approach shares none of the gaudy exuberance celebrated - and often demonstrated." (Wikipedia)

Chaudhuri's India is a land of "the banal and the everyday that comprise your life". Despite the title, he is interested in the mortal and the mundane. Indeed, it seems that only in the title has Chaudhuri veered away from the explicable. Instead of Rushdie's India, then, we have a
much more muted evocation of ordinary India. Chaudhuri achieves this in a way that is oddly hard to describe, given a style that appears so keen to avoid both the exceptional and the exceptionable. So, without wishing to be too reductive, let us say that his writing is best embodied in - wait for it - his use of the semicolon. This enables him neatly to structure his descriptions, and fussily to add on extra qualifications: "the aroma from the kitchen hung among the guests like another visitor; no one remarked on it; no one was unaware of it" (200). It helps him linger on the "gorgeous banalities" under description.

Of course, Chaudhuri is being faithful to the middle-class perspective of the Lals and Senguptas, for whom life is no more than "daytime drifting" between recitals and tea-drinking. But he is perhaps not rewarding the faith of the reader, who might wish to be treated to something more entertaining.

*The Immortals* is a fascinating look at the Bombay of 30 years ago — a Bombay that existed in pre-boom India. Most of all, it's a meditation on how - art and commerce interconnect through insightful observations that are both precise and graceful.

Mallika Sengupta has a voice that is out of tune with (real-life) sisters Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhosle, so beloved by *filmi* crowd. Newly arrived and friendless in Bombay, Mallika takes up singing again with the hope of becoming a recording artist, eventually settling on Shyamji Lal as her teacher. In turn, her son Nirmalya, bored with school, becomes even more entranced by music, gently goading their teacher that the devotional *bhajans* his mother learns are not worthy of his illustrious
Chaudhuri revels in simple pleasures, such as the wonder of a teenager discovering the world of ideas. But the middle-aged Shyamji Lal understands how delicate the life of a musician is. Where the Senguptas appear to worry only about the next party, he has the age-old duty of providing for an extended family constantly making petty demands of him. Where Nirmalya thinks of ragas as giving him "an ideal, magical sense" of India, Shyamji sees music as a means to upward mobility. A practical man, he sees no shame in his son taking up the new Yamaha keyboard, moving further away from the late Ram Lal's legacy.

As the novel switches its focus from mother to son, it transforms into a coming-of-age story in which sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll have been replaced by raga, Will Durant's *The Story of Philosophy* and commuter train travel. Nirmalya, with his frayed corduroys and faded *kurtas*, may be rebelling against the corporate life embraced by his parents, but they are also complicit in his choices. Chaudhuri is a master of nuance, able to interpret those strange thoughts that strike unexpectedly. Nirmalya sees his mother chatting with a friend as if they exist on a "hallucinatory plane of repetitive, everyday existence."(8) The father is moved by the son's seemingly youthful interest in philosophy, "just as you might listen to a piece of music which numbs you to the present and makes your nerves tingle to the daydreams of who you were thirty or forty years ago."(88)

It is obvious that Nirmalya is a stand-in for Chaudhuri. He was raised in the right neighborhoods in Bombay, his mother a singer, his father an executive with *Britannia Biscuits*, and he later studied philosophy in
England. In fact, the novel could risk being too close to a self-portrait. There is no real crisis of faith leading to violent transformation - much like ordinary life - but that is not Chaudhuri's style, anyway. Instead, he revels in simple pleasures, such as the wonder of a teenager discovering the world of ideas: "Words hoarded meaning like treasure; and Nirmalya was at an age when mere etymology brought to sight and lit up an "avenue - whose pull was mysterious and irresistible - he hadn't known existed."(245)

His characters drift along as the world unfolds. Time passes; life happens. The four-stringed *tanpura* is often described as simply a droning accompaniment to other instruments, but Chaudhuri sees why it is so integral to classical music for its ability "to create not only a single vibration, but a world. Nevertheless, the novel is impressive and rare, and it seems somewhat old-fashioned in its slowness, its refusal to tip towards simplistic plotting, grandeur and postmodern irony. The clash between the old and the new is in fact a central theme of the novel. Broadly speaking, Chaudhuri examines the ways in which customs both unite families and pull them apart, and the anxieties stirred by that struggle.

Nirmalya, the son of a top business executive in Bombay, doesn't like his parents' lavish lifestyle. He develops a passion for the Indian classical music of his mother's music teachers. Why don't they play classical music only, he asks the teachers, who play popular music as well. Why doesn't she practise more regularly, he asks his mother.

It's the idealism of an adolescent surrounded by worldly, protective adults. Nirmalya's parents are an attractive couple, loving, supportive
but with a weakness for the high life they have grown accustomed to. The musicians are fascinating. Descended from a long line of musicians who were once patronized by princes and kings, they now have to make a living as music teachers and popular entertainers. Apart from their special talent, they are just like ordinary people. They are not the only ones who make compromises with their art. So does Nirmalya's mother, a gifted singer who chose to be a housewife married to a successful man.

He is perhaps the most attractive character in the book. A man who shares his wife's aspirations and tries to get her a record deal — and send his son abroad when the boy wants to study philosophy in England. He tries to help others too — but let's not give the story away.

Chaudhuri describes Bombay just as vividly when he wants to. It's just that he has become less prodigal with language. Here, he describes the new home Nirmalya and his parents move to after leaving their palatial company apartment: This, maybe, was the 'quiet, green place' that Nirmalya had been thinking about, but whose existence he'd never really suspected; a lane off one of the downward slopes of Pali Hill, a blue plaque announcing its name hanging by two rings from a pole at the base of the lane, which swung in a monsoon breeze in a self-contained way, a gate opening on to a building, a second-storey apartment, three bedrooms, roughly fourteen hundred square feet, just a little more than a third of the flat in Thacker Towers. It was, as if wandering down Thacker Towers, they'd discovered an annexe no one had noticed before, an annexe whose balcony opened on to a silent neighbour, a jackfruit tree — and they'd decided never to return to the main flat.
Chaudhuri paints a luminous portrait of the spiritual and emotional force behind a revered Indian tradition; of two fundamentally different but intricately intertwined families; and of a society choosing between the old and the new. *The Immortals*, appropriately, is a novel unconcerned with beginnings and ends. Skimming across the years and the sea - and cityscapes of Bombay, Chaudhuri conjures up brief glimpses of the dichotomy of changing yet timeless scenes. At their centre is Shyamji, son of the classical musician Ram Lal. In life, the older man was worshipped as a guru, but Shyamji is a less devout practitioner of the musical arts. Happy to teach undemanding songs to his many students, Shyamji bows to popular tastes. Among his disciples, however, the young Ninnallya demands that Shyamji stay true to the ancient forms.

Shyamji has music in his blood, for his father was the acclaimed 'heavenly singer' and *guru*, Ram Lal. But Shyam Lal is not his father, and knows he never will be. Mallika Sengupta's voice could have made her famous, but to be the wife of a successful businessman is a full-time occupation in itself. Mallika's son, Nirmalya, believes in suffering for his art, and for him, all compromise is failure: those with talent should be true to that talent.

The novel demonstrates diminishing world of classical Indian music which serves as the backdrop for an examination of the relationships between talent, business, ambition and failure. It tells the story of a music teacher who goes from flat to flat in Bombay, offering instruction to wealthy housewives. Although the teacher has an undeniable gift, he lacks discipline and has little ambition. When offered
junk food in the homes he visits, he is unable to say no. As a result, he suffers from dyspepsia, and is increasingly prone to napping; at the end of story he is dozing on a wicker sofa in a student’s home, a high-rise overlooking the Arabian Sea. His illness, however, has a cause beyond a weakness for gulab jamun and jalebis. The novel traces the relationship between not only talent and business, but also ambition and failure or its gentler sibling, resignation.

Shyamji must similarly challenge those whose sense of Indian art or culture has been shaped by what they have encountered in the country’s most celebrated fiction. He is not a talkative chronicler of his nation’s birth; he has not risen from the ranks of the illiterate to seek violent revenge; he is not a fertile carrier of the germ of globalization; he doesn’t struggle with his identity in a confrontation with the West. In Shyamji we find an unprecedented mix: the artist as part-genius part-grihaswami (domestic householder). He has no real ancestors in India’s Anglophone fiction except for a similar teacher in an earlier novel.

The novel ends with reading of Nirmalya's mailbox as he opens his college mailbox in London along with an invitation to join a discussion on the second coming of Christ by members of the New Church, a scribbled note on the back of a scrap of circular from Mr. Dickinson, asking whether the time of the next tutorial could possibly be changed, a terse pamphlet, full of exclamation marks and a smudged picture of Winnie Mandela, exhorting the reader to become one of the many who no longer ate South African oranges, there was, in Nirmalya's class, an aerogramme, a silent traveller from India, its blue peering out from
amidst the white and yellow. Thus, a careful study of the novel shows that it is truly a wonderful work of fiction, and helps us think about the myriad ways in which classical Indian music makes life so meaningful and how their life style changes, even though, they are culturally different.

Author cum singer Amit Chaudhuri's fiction is a distinct voice in the world of contemporary Indian English Literature. His novels efficiently present an ongoing debate over art versus money in the age of commerce and globalization. He utilizes music as a metaphor in his novels to show how trans-valuation of values is taking place in the matter-driven modern society. In his novel *The Immortals* (2009) too, he weaves the narrative around the *ragas* of music to show the plight of those artists who are struggling to find their right place in the vogue of popular art culture. He disapproves of fusion music which destroys aesthetic and artistic purity and pleads in favour of the eternity of classical music which has a transcendental appeal.

In his view, a single melodious raga is capable of casting spell on the listeners; it uplifts and liberates them from their mundane considerations. Pure music is transcendental in nature as the novelist claims that his "own private joys came from delight in creation" (*Afternoon Raag*). He holds the view that good music raises our soul to the state of epiphany by dissolving and merging all the disharmonies of human life into a divine ecstasy of melody. It is perhaps due to this reason that Chaudhuri presents certain aspects of Indian Classical music such as the timings and special settings of different *ragas*, their
instrumental accompaniment, and other nuances with acute precision in his navels. He exquisitely blends music with realistic narration and thereby achieves a 'musical realism' in his novels.

Chaudhuri considers music as a language to articulate his feelings and ideas. That is why he "brings out the underlying music and poetry of our life and enables us to cope with the ever-repeating and ever-teasing sameness, commonness and earthiness of our diurnal discourse" (Shukla 51-52). He pays high regard to music by treating it as a means to achieve sublimity and immortality; "there are some singers whose voices are so melodious that...their music brings to this world the message of that other one, to which they'll eventually return" (guardian.co.uk). Music secures great significance in the life and literature of Chaudhuri he has acknowledged in the interview given to Sumana R. Ghosh.

The novels of Chaudhuri relate to each other with the common thread of music which he utilizes as a metaphor to study the metropolitan sensibility of the modern Indians. In his novels A Strange and Sublime Address (1991), Afternoon Raag (1993), Freedom Song (1998), A New World (2000), and The Immortals (2009), we notice a unique interweaving of music with the life of upwardly mobile-professionals. In his interview with Salil Tripathi, the novelist points out: "I am trying to clear the space for a discussion of Indian culture in the context of modernity as distinct from the postcolonial discourse. This is not a postcolonial response to the Empire, but a 150 years story of self-division and creative tension".

The author pays homage to music in his novels in an incredibly
vivid fashion. He drives his point home through the dishotomic trajectories of love for music versus metropolitan identity and a quest for artistic excellence versus a reaction to the family's worldliness. This shows that the tension in his novels arises largely due to such dichotomies which emerge as a result of encroaching bourgeois values that have overshadowed art and artists. He illustrates how the perception of economy determines, controls and even vanquishes human life in the modern society. To quote lan Almond once again:

The motif of economy is very prominent in Chaudhuri's fiction which operates within the existential framework of India. He concerns in his novels with India whose increasing commodification of daily life is increasingly transforming culture into an appendage of capital. His stories depict an urban India whose individuals are constantly struggling to convert their cultural symbolic equivalent. (164)

*The Immortals* has been considered as a highly finished novel with music as its prime concern. In the age of commercialization and global fashion when popular music and hip-hop culture are threatening the existence of classical music, this novel acts as a literary and aesthetic defense in favour of the purity of classical music which possesses a divine essence. He sets his narrative in Bombay of the 1980s and attempts to discover the world of ideas through the strings of *tanpura* and *ragas*. He believes that the Indian classical music is 'an ideal, magical sense' and therefore, through the touchstone of classical notes, he explores the aspirations, ambition and power of the two Indian families- the Lals and the Senguptas. *The Immortals* offers a valuable study of social class and
an insightful debate on tradition versus modernity and spiritual versus luxury. It details the humdrumness of bourgeois Bengali lives with a natural dealing with the significance of art in today's world. Against the framework of Indian Classical music, the novelist meticulously talks about the cultural change in India during 1980's. At the same time, the skilful employment of art, music and philosophy enables Chaudhuri to efficiently construct the narrative of *The Immortals* in the form of a commentary on cultural transformation in India.

The novelist is trained equally in Indian classical music and Western pop and rock but he is sharply against the chaotic fusion-music-culture which is disturbing the purity of aesthetics. As it is evident from the title of his recent music album "This is Not a Fusion", Chaudhuri is not against the Western tradition of music rather his rage is against the discordant musical overlap. He despises the commercialization and marketing of music which has become the way of the world today and which is collapsing the whole artistic empire of world.

The policy of liberalization and globalization which was introduced in India during 1980's certainly brought some positive changes in our country but it also affected the Indian art and cultural tradition adversely. Markets gained immense importance and 'salability' became a paramount feature for evaluation in the era of globalization. This salability\(^1\) has been shown walking hand in hand with music in the novel *The Immortals* reflecting on the conflict between aesthetic and commercial values in globalized India. Chaudhuri has tried to understand the connection between human life and the need to compromise. Chaudhuri's remark
about the book is worth quoting:

In *The Immortals*, the traditional *guru*, oddly enough, seems to be able to cope with these facts better, and to take to the situation much more naturally, than the more romantic, educated, bourgeois boy. The so-called "traditional" in India has embraced capitalism, wonderfully, in a way in which *bhadralok* [middle-class] India has not. But with the music teacher it has tragic resonances as well, because he can't quite go that far and he fails. It has ironical, comic resonances for the boy because in the end he doesn't lose anything. He does survive, even though he's physically flawed. But he's fine: in spite of all his affectations for poverty, he's not poor. So the book is about the survival of the rich, which is an unsurprising story. The rich do survive, (oxonianreview.org)

In his collection of stories *Real Time* (2002) Chaudhuri mockingly portrays the poetry tutor who scribbles advertising slogans for a biscuit company and wonders at the functional value of the managing director's wife who feels delighted to sing *ghazals* for a corporate dinner party. The author puts it thus: "Once her performance was over, the *shami kababs* were circulated again, a faint taste of 'culture' in their mouths, people went to the bar to replenish their glasses" (*Real Time* 136). "Sikh businessman's daughter, a minister's son: the wife of an Air India Official" and "corporate wives; devout traders and tax defaulters whose anxieties were oddly consoled by music" (TI 107, 49). Commenting on
the novelist's depiction of domineering nature of money over music in the present society, lan Almond appropriately writes:

The lengths that Chaudhuri goes to in his representation for amercantile bourgeoisie- one which, in its worst instants, sees "culture" exclusively as something which reflects, and facilitates, the circulation of capital-inevitably courts moments of collusion and complexity in the every object of critique. This is primarily because Chaudhuri's stories are dominated by two kinds of characters; thosewho seek recognition, and those who seek oblivion. (167)

The employment of music in the novels of Amit Chaudhuri is not entirely anew venture. There has been a strong tradition of music in fictional narratives. We find music occupying a significant place in Salman Rushdie's The Ground Beneath Her Feet (2000), Vikram Seth's A Suitable Boy (1993) and An Equal Music (1999), and Ameen Merchant's The Silent Raga (2007). The narrative of all these novels is inextricably woven either with Indian Classical ragas or with Western musical notes. It is, however, worth noticing that if Rushdie talks about rock music, Vikram Seth deals with western classical or European music, and Merchant asserts women's point of view through Carnatic music, Chaudhuri utilizes music for the miracle of song and its pleasure on the one hand, and the value of music in the society and its marketplace on the other. The novelist elaborates this idea further by saying:

It is explored within a framework of fictions and ambiguities, the relationship between the teacher and the
pupil, and the relationship between the material world and the transcendental world of music, of art. These relationships have to do with desire - genuine yearning - but also power, the powerful and the helpless, (untitledbooks.com)

Amit Chaudhuri has often been said to follow Salman Rushdie in his use of music in fiction but a close examination of their narratives clearly shows that music in Rushdie's fictional word is shaped by the authorial assertion whereas in Chaudhuri, music is only a spoke in the wheel of plot. If Rushdie uses music like a sacramental key in the novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (2000), for Chaudhuri "music remains just a pleasurable sensation, through an exquisite pleasure" (Kundu 74). Moreover, Rushdie connects music to myth with new echoes in the modern connects music to myth with new echoes in the society which is under gradual metamorphosis. *The Immortals* opens amidst the ragas of Bhimpalasi, Yaman, Raga malkauns, Miya ki Malhar, Hansdhwani, Jaijaiwanti, Des, Puriya Dhanashree and Bhairav against the background of Tanpura and Harmonium but the growing interventions of money and world popularity soon replace them with Western guitar. The novelist mocks at the strange developments in the field of music when he writes:

The tape recorder made the process of teaching and learning less mess; more compressed and expeditious for both the time-passed guru and his undecided disciple, shackled to the modern life that had formed him, eager to learn, but within the secret, exploratory rhythms of his day. (TI178)

Chaudhuri draws our attention to the changing human and social
values' "A man who could play a western instrument would have a livelihood in today's world", whereas "the Tanpura, with its four strings, hadn't lost its magic, but it became more and more difficult to make time for it" (TI 242). It is a euphonious novel with both plaintive and comic elements about the powerful undercurrent of cultural and familial tradition in a society heading fast towards future. Set in the 1980s of Bombay the novel reflects greatly on the relationship between the two widely distinct yet intricately associated families of Lals and Sengupta and their preferences between the old and the new tradition.

Ananya Jahangir Kabir appreciates the appeal of the Indian music in a significant manner and says that its "effect stems not from narrative or descriptive logic, but "structures of feeling" that transmit the somatics of memory and belonging across generations" (2008:183). But, Shyamji's remarks draw our attention directly to the gradual devaluation of classical art in the present day market culture where: "No one wanted to learn classical music from him; in fact he had no disciple in classical music" (TI 105). Shyam Lal knows that "there's money in music arrangement" (TI 105) and therefore embraces these "lighter" forms of music that would not only "pay the rent, and for his son's and daughter's weddings, but because they opened an avenue into the sort of life he wanted.... These mildly touching songs were a form of currency; classical music-Shastriya Sangeet-a responsibility" (TI 105-106).

*The Immortals* turns out to be a sustained mediation on the relationship of art with commerce. It portrays efficiently the age in which we don't see raga anymore, because for the musicians today the "raga has
not to be played correctly or well; it has to be courted and pursued" (TI 186). Shyamji is an apt sketch of the degenerating artists of the contemporary culture who rely on commoditization; "...you must first satisfy your physical needs, of food, shelter, clothing, before you can satisfy your psychological ones-like culture" (TI 192). Music, therefore, is being commoditized by the artists like Shyamji who deal in "the musical currency of the day" (TI 174). The other face of coin is brutal materialistic age which tends to force true artists to lean towards popular music for the sake of their livelihood. Chaudhuri amusingly describes the pretentious personality of the music teacher Shyamji thus; "Here was a man in a loose white kurta and pajamas; 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 "(TI99).

As the novel switches its focus from mother to son, the narrative of raga gets replaced by a story spiced with sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. The novel 'is a sarcastic comment on such musicians and artists for whom music is not a sadhana but a mechanical art to please the baser audience. Ridiculously, they fail to excel both in the field of eastern and the Western art: "Shyamji fitted neither the model of the Eastern artist, nor that of the Western musician. The Eastern artist was part of religious figure, the Western part rebel; Shyamji seemed to be neither" (TI 99).

Chaudhuri smiles at the simple wonders of a teenager discovering the world of ideas. Nirmalya, with his love for pure music and faded kurtas, may be seen as a rebel against the corporate life embraced by his parents and music teacher. He has been well contrasted with the middle-
aged Shyam Lal who understands the tenuous nature of a musician's life. Where Nirmalya thinks of ragas as giving him an ideals feel of India, Shyamji sees music as a vehicle for social climbing. Therefore, the disciple Nirmalaya fails to associate with the ideals of his teacher Shyamji whom he rarely calls ‘guruji’ because he teaches his affluent disciples the "songs with which a middle class of faithful, hardworking husbands and vivacious housewives expressed its dreams" (TI 174). The boy seeks a transcendental and self-realizing appeal of the Indian classical music in Shyamji's singing but he fails to achieve this. He craves for the music revered by maestros like Kishori Amonkar because "it was music that had brought about the change...without warming to the status of an equal, the phase of discovery" (TI 101.)

The protagonist Nirmalya is preoccupied with music and the question of how art should match with the contemporary world. Since he remains uncured of his metaphysical turn of mind by Shyamji's training, he avers "the mandatory pretence at being musical" (TI 100). When he perceives that "music is leaving the house of the Ustads" he turns himself to the philosophies of Kant, Schopenhaur and Nietzsche (TI 242). Nirmalya rejects both the rock music and Rimbaud and leaves India for England in the pursuit of philosophical knowledge. Truly, he is an angst-ridden youth who believes in the purity of art but it is ironical to see that Nirmalya, who was highly critical of her mother's and teachers mechanical attitude towards music, survives well in England without any sense of remorse.

In *The Immortals*, both Shyamji's acceptance of popular music by
abandoning his father's legacy of the Indian Classical music and Nirmalya's refuge to England is a satire on the prevailing art tradition that challenges the existence and sustenance of both the classical art and its true devotees. The novelist also comments on mushroom-like growth of the artists who thrive on cheap popularity and try:

....not only to satisfy the middle class urge for music, but the relentless, child-like longing to become the musician (how simply the metamorphosis could be achieved); to move to centre-stage; at least for fifteen minutes, where the traditional musician previously was; (TI 64)

The narrative is a delightful tapestry of small events and beautifully observed details which sketches the world of Bombay bourgeoisie with the authenticity of the emotional landscape. Interestingly, the city of Bombay also figures in the novel as a character. There are arguments about the role of music in East and West, in the marketplace and in society. Written in the style of Comedy of Manners, the novel's style echoes its subject. In this highly symphonic book, we find an enriched shadow of the "people from the middle class" who "were themselves wanting to be musicians, wanting their moment in the musical world, and using their teacher as a facilitator" (untitledbooks. com). This view has been convincingly explicated through the character of Mrs. Sengupta who is apparently drawn to her teacher Shyam Lal because of his talent but at the same time she also tries to dominate over him due to her elevated social position and power.

*The Immortals*, thus, is a distinct “agglomeration of notes” on a
music sheet (TI186). In the epigraph to the novel, Chaudhuri quotes the words of Heraclitus that “The mortals become immortals and; the immortals become mortals” which are highly significant because the entire narrative seems to be an elaboration of the idea contained in it. Music serves different objectives in this novel in the form of a compulsion, a vocation, a status symbol, a pretension, an aspiration, a heritage, a way of life and a means of livelihood. Being a sustained deliberation on the vexed relationship between art and commerce; natural and mechanical lifestyle, thenarrative effectively defends our Indian Classical music against the intimidations of commercialism and consumerism in modern age.

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