Worldly Tenancy: Amit Chaudhuri, *The Immortals*, and the Novel

WILLIAM GHOSH

IN A SHORT ARTICLE, 'TWO SISTERS', published in the Indian *Telegraph* at the start of 2009, Amit Chaudhuri remembers a 'lovely, wise, slightly fatalistic Bengali saying': 'Lakshmi and Saraswati never inhabit the same house'.[1] Lakshmi being the goddess of 'good fortune, prosperity, wealth', Saraswati that of 'poetry, music, and learning', the saying suggests that these two pursuits – art and learning on the one hand, prosperity on the other – are distinct from, or even at odds with, one another.[2] As the essay goes on, Chaudhuri describes what he calls the 'Mannian turn' in Bengali *bhadralok* culture, in which mercantile pursuits and 'bourgeois order' 'transition' into 'daydreaming and the imagination': the 'courtship of Lakshmi' gives way to the 'pull of Saraswati'.[3] In Thomas Mann this transition was fictionalised in the story of the Buddenbrook family. In Bengal – the 'mood and trajectory' of whose 'modernity' Chaudhuri is describing – it is exemplified, emblematically, in the generational history of the Tagores. What delights Chaudhuri about the saying, however, is that it is subtly self-deluding. For all our noble words, the pursuit of Saraswati and Lakshmi, of art and prosperity, are related to one another. The pursuit of music or poetry does conflict with the demands of

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accumulating wealth. Yet it is also made possible by the generational wealth that has been accumulated. Wealth is dissipated through the pursuit of the arts; but for the philanthropist, the arts are an edifying object on which the money they have earned can be spent. The pursuit of learning – another of Saraswati's domains – is still more confusingly linked to prosperity in the middle-class mind: which of the two is the means, which the end? 'The gradations of meanings and nuances attached to these deities in the Bengali imagination', Chaudhuri writes, 'tell us much about the itinerary of this bourgeoisie'. 'Entrepreneurship' is pursued 'ambivalently' as if it is not wholly polite or respectable. Yet devotion to Saraswati is always 'mildly calculating': 'a route to her restless sibling [Lakshmi] without clearly admitting – to others but most clearly to themselves – that this route was being pursued'.

'Two Sisters' was published in the same year as Chaudhuri's fifth novel, *The Immortals* (2009), and can be read as a thumbnail of its themes and contexts. *The Immortals* is a novel that explores the overlapping demands of art and material security, asking – as the title suggests – how we seek permanence or perpetuity and before whose statue we ultimately offer, and find, our life. As a novel about music, it also explores the relationship between the novel and its sister arts. It is a crucial text in Chaudhuri's career, expressing in most depth his vision of the novel as a form.

Born to Bengali parents in Calcutta, Chaudhuri was brought up in Bombay, where his father was a senior executive at a multi-national biscuit company.[4] His mother, Bijoya, was a prominent singer of Tagore songs. Chaudhuri has frequently discussed his mother's influence on his conception of the aesthetic. As a teenager, he became a practitioner of North Indian classical music under the tutelage of his mother's music teacher, Pandit Govindprasad Jaipurwale. He read English at University College London, after which he returned to Bandra – a middle-class suburb of Bombay – for a year before returning to England to write a doctorate on the poetry of D. H. Lawrence in Oxford.[5] Whilst in Bandra, a neighbourhood in Bombay, he began to write the 'St. Cyril Road' poems which constitute his earliest mature writing. Like V. S. Naipaul, one of his most

important influences, Chaudhuri is a highly autobiographical writer; elements of this story are told in many of his major works.

The Immortals describes the itineraries of two families in Bombay from the end of the 1970s until the end of the 1980s. Neither is native to the city, and both are in the process of finding their place. But whereas the Lal family is still finding its footing in urban, middle-class security, the Senguptas belong to the executive class, at the crest of the corporate wave. Shyam Lal is the current patriarch of a sprawling Rajasthani gharana, a dynastic group of classic musicians who once served at a princely court. His father, Pandit Ram Lal, dead when the novel opens, is remembered as a kind of 'saint' for the single-mindedness with which he pursued musical excellence and scorned worldly rewards.[6] Yet Shyam, his son, lives in a newer economy, in which old values and social relationships are implicated in the market. He will make his way in the world by selling music lessons at elevated prices – in classical but also in popular genres – to the spouses and children of wealthy Bombay businesspeople, ambitious for attention, recording contracts, and fame.

One of his pupils, Mallika Sengupta, a gifted amateur singer, lives in Bombay with her husband Apurva and their son Nirmalya. They are Bengalis and have no family home or history in the city. They live instead in the more and more palatial apartments provided by Apurva's company. He is a director of a large corporation and in the course of the novel becomes its head. 'Shyam' is another name for Krisha, the divine flute-player, and as the novel progresses, Mallika's son, Nirmalya, entering adolescence, becomes fascinated with Shyam's music. Nirmalya too becomes Shyam's student, though he never undergoes the student's ritual initiation. Indeed, Shyam himself, we are told, 'was not a teacher in the mythological sense'. 'The disciple wants nothing of the guru but knowledge; but Shyamji ... lived in a world of transactions. He expected his students to promote him; his students expected him to promote them' (p. 373). Mallika admires Shyam, but he is one of a succession of teachers. As with his brother-in-law, Motilal, Mallika 'could replace him whenever she wished' (p. 37).

Throughout the novel, the pursuit of music, in its uncompromised form, is described in the language of religious asceticism. As we have seen, Shyam's father is remembered as a 'saint', though in terms of worldly fame he 'had not made an impact on Bombay' (p. 36). As Nirmalya's obsession with North Indian classical music develops, he is described as a 'puritan' (p. 231) and a 'true disciple' ('asli chela') (p. 322). 'It was expensive maintaining a saint, a mystic', his father, Apurva, grumbles (p. 289). While Shyam Lal is a devout Brahmin, wearing the sacred thread throughout the novel, the Senguptas are more secular, seeing Shyam's belief in the protective power of the gods as childish and old-fashioned. 'What kind of man was this[?]', Apurva and Mallika ask each other when the ill Shyam refuses hospital treatment, 'paralysed, at the end of the twentieth-century, by the sort of absurd superstition they'd seen around them, and left behind, as children?' (pp. 344-5).

The Chaudhuri family did not subscribe to the tenets of traditional Hinduism, belonging instead to the Brahmo reformist movement which had many adherents in higher-caste Bengali families such as the (fictional) Senguptas. Like Nirmalya, the young Amit Chaudhuri belonged to a 'secular class' who found the 'quasi-religious' associations of Indian classical music 'discomfiting';[7] and, as for Nirmalya, the author's discovery of music did not lead him to traditional Hinduism.[8] Nonetheless, he does describe his discovery of North Indian classical music as a 'religious conversion', 'entailing a new regime and way of looking at the world and . . . a sense of "rightness" and homecoming' (*FR*, p. 245). Chaudhuri has described his mother Bijoya's singing voice as 'transcendental' in the sense that it rose above the emotion residing in a particular human subjectivity (*FR*, p. 227). In *The Immortals*, 'Mallika Sengupta's voice', has a 'rare devotional timbre'. 'When she sang, the true note of religion and renunciation sounded in her voice, as if from the memory of another existence she'd led in some other world' (p. 118).

The ascetic demands of music offer one way of transcending time and change in *The Immortals*. The other great desire of the characters is reflected in the search for housing and shelter, promising insurance and insulation against mutability. Throughout the novel, both families are perpetually in quest of

more secure and spacious accommodation: their movements through Bombay chart their growing prosperity and their changing social place. The Lals move from a chawl beside the King's Circle roundabout to a new housing development in northern Borivali to their final resting place in middle-class Versova. The Senguptas begin in a middle-class Cumballa Hill apartment, move through a pair of increasingly luxurious south Bombay apartments – on Malabar Hill and then on Cuffe Parade – before coming to rest in the quieter comfort of Bandra. Chaudhuri has written that the raga should be 'continuous' with the sound of the 'world' beyond it: 'changes of weather', 'birdsong' and 'car horn', and the notes of the tanpura 'leak' into one another such that the raga becomes part of the world's 'textuality and texture' (*FR*, pp. 40-1). In the opening scene of the novel, in the Lal's King's Circle chawl, we hear exactly this 'significant leakage' (*FR*, p. 41) as the 'notes' of raga Bhimpalasi merge with the 'anxious music' of 'bullocks' and 'car horns' (p. 1). But as the characters become more prosperous, they try to seal themselves off from the city, its sounds and punishing climate. The Senguptas' lives take place against the 'sempiternal background of air conditioning' (p. 211). The interior garden of their Malabar Hill apartment exists in a state of 'changeless freedom from the vagaries of the seasons' (p. 40). They prefer their private, air-conditioned car to public transport, the 'busy, glinting, ragged world kept at bay by glass' (p. 274). This is the state of life Shyam seeks, and as he grows richer he buys himself a private car to move around the city. It is a sign of his conversion to music and his rejection of bourgeois luxury that, reaching adolescence, Nirmalya discovers the joy of travelling by train.

The movements of the characters coincide with the rapid growth of Bombay through the 1970s and 1980s. The city itself, as it grows and solidifies, becomes an image of the inviolability the characters seek. Over the period in which the novel is set, roughly 1979-1989, cash 'in its unbridled form' begins to percolate the city 'like a sea-breeze blowing inland', as a period of tight regulation on the private sector begins to buckle and yield (p. 288).[9] By the end of this process of deregulation, Bombay would have become one of India's, and the world's, great

centres of financial exchange. It is important, in this context, that neither of the two families – the Lals or the Senguptas – is ancestrally Maharashtrian or Gujarati, native to the city or region. In both cases they have come to the city as a market-place, to trade their labour and expertise. In the course of the novel, luxury developments appear in Navi Mumbai and on Nariman Point, the grandeur of the buildings giving a sense of permanence undermined only by their newness. The Malabar Hill apartment block 'strode' 'overnight' onto the 'skyline': 'Once there, it was difficult to imagine it hadn't been there before' (p. 40). 'The city had begun to glitter', Chaudhuri writes; even the smaller neighbourhoods 'sparkled with money' (p. 312). But driving through Versova to visit Shyam's glossy new apartment building, Nirmalya sees 'the rubble and bricks of nascent construction projects piled randomly in heaps on its borders' (p. 339).

The emphasis on newness is just one way in which Chaudhuri ironises the 'whirl and glitter' of the city (p. 341). Its scale and sheen seem eternal and larger-than-human, but in fact they are contingent on humans, and frail as humans are frail. The illusion of ease and security is sustained by staff from nearby slums who *are* reliant on the vagaries of weather and public transport (p. 55). For the Lal family, their lives in the city are dependent on Shyam's employment: 'Bombay said . . . "Life goes on; it has always gone on"', but they get a sense of the 'void' when they see that Shyam is growing ill (p. 346). One character grows 'metaphorical' at the end of her 'worldly tenancy': 'Property prices were incredible. "The only safe place to go is upstairs"' (p. 372). That so much of Bombay sits on land reclaimed from the sea feeds Chaudhuri's presentation of the city as an invention of the eye and the intellect.[10] While Nirmalya is still a child, his father's offices move from Dardar to 'that new reclamation on Marine Drive, that puny strip called Nariman point' (p. 25). 'One evening', we are told, 'when this strip was still coming into existence',

> Nirmalya discovered he was scared of the ocean. The sea here had an ancient energy, as it swirled round the finger extending into the water. On both sides, as mother, father,

> and son stood there for a moment, Nirmalya threatened by blasts of wind, couples moved dimly, mysteriously, unperturbed, as if inside a foyer in a large building. This, the phantasmagoria of roaring, maddened waves and darkness – was what stood behind, at least momentarily, the city they were becoming intimate with. (p. 25)

The sea becoming land and the related idea of inversion or reversal are key to this image of the city. The anger of the 'maddened' sea comes to seem imaginary, a 'phantasmagoria'. On the brittle 'finger extending into the water, 'in the midst of this void or 'darkness', people move around 'unperturbed' as if in the 'foyer of a large building', sheltered and at home. The city of Bombay becomes itself a kind of housing, in which the climate can be regularised and the threat of the waves deferred.

How good really *is* Mallika Sengupta as a singer? Bijoya Chaudhuri, the obvious model, was a well-known singer of Tagore songs with an extensive recording catalogue. But with the fictional Mallika, the evidence is less clear. She grows up, we are told, in a North Bengal town, high-caste but impoverished, following the premature death of her father. She marries Apurva, the son of a wealthy zamindari family, although 'she was not in love', because she 'decided, shrewdly, that life with him would allow her to pursue her singing' (pp. 13-14). By the time the novel opens, however, music has become a 'trickle in her life'. It is 'constant' but never consuming; it is 'not allowed to disturb her routine' (p. 15). Sporadically, with her husband's encouragement, she seeks a recording contract. But as time passes it becomes clear that there is no realistic chance of her getting one. In Bombay she skimps on her language work, becoming absorbed in Nirmalya's schooling.[11] She neglects her singing practice, 'affected by the parties' that she attends in the evenings with her husband. 'In the morning . . . she had trouble with her voice, it wavered, weak with underwork' (pp. 115-16). She is 'swallowed' we are told, 'almost willingly', into the 'extravaganza' of Apurva's world (p. 115).

The Immortals is ambiguous about the extent of Mallika's talent, and ambivalent too about the causes of its neglect. Is she a victim of patriarchal circumstance? Or do her own desires

waver and change? While she is not an autonomous agent when it comes to the neglect of her talent, she is also, as we have seen, 'almost willing' to be distracted by the lure of extravagance. This willingness develops through the novel, and we are shown the way she learns to justify it to herself. When her son accuses her of 'not practising at all', she feels 'torn' between her son, 'who'd temporarily assume[d] the role of guru, always expecting more . . . devotion to her art', and her husband, 'whose wisdom she was guided by, and who, in a way, shaped her life'.

> She, in the middle of this, could take neither Apurva Sengupta's comfortable faith nor her son's impatience seriously; compromise was necessary to lead a life even as unreal as this on an even keel – compromise, which engendered but also tempered disappointment. (pp. 116-17).

Mallika is a compromised figure, unable to finally 'take seriously' either Nirmalya's exhortations or the values of the bourgeois world represented by her husband. Yet even in the next sentence we hear her internalise the values of that world: the propositional statement, 'compromise was necessary. . .' must be read as free indirect discourse. 'To live life . . . on an even keel' is the language of the Yacht Club. This is surely a version of Apurva's commercial common sense that she has begun to adopt as her own.

Both the narrative technique and the theme of compromise and accommodation are paradigmatic of the realist novel. The point, to borrow from Michael McKeon's account of the emergence of novelistic irony, is not to satirise Mallika because she is falling away from an ascetic ideal. It is 'rather to expose the exquisitely subtle adjustments that comprise the process of arriving at a firm conviction' in the context of secularising change.[12] In this instance, an ascetic ideal residually associated with North Indian classical music comes into conflict, in the mind of Mallika Sengupta, with the values of 'the bluffly confident commercial . . . middle class', to which she belongs.[13]

Shyam justifies his own compromises in similar terms. A devout Brahmin from a dynasty of court musicians, Shyam's credentials and talent are irrefutable. Yet, Nirmalya, who is 16

at this point, is scandalised by his neglect of the more austere arts. Seeing that more and more of Shyam's time is spent teaching '"light" forms' to the Bombay elite – bhajans, ghazals, as opposed to ragas – Nirmalya confronts his teacher: 'Shyamji, why don't you sing classical more often? Why don't you sing fewer ghazals and sing more at classical concerts?' (pp. 191-2). Shyam, 'reminded of the boy's naivety', replies that he must establish himself financially first; 'then I can devote myself completely to art' (p. 192). Years later, however, when he knows that he is dying, Shyam remembers this exchange, and the 'leg-pulling' – 'Baba is a big critic' – that accompanied it. He also remembers how these 'recurrent queries' made him feel 'slightly uneasy':

> the boy, with obviously no real anxieties to plague him, had asked, genuinely exercised, 'Why don't you sing classical more often?' and Shyamji had tried explaining, with a patience that he reserved for the pure hearted but naïve, 'Baba, you cannot practise art on an empty stomach. Let me make enough money from these lighter forms; and then I'll be able to devote myself entirely to classical'. A perfectly workable blueprint. But, to Shyamji's discomfort, 'the critic' had not replied, but looked at him beady-eyed, as if to say, with a seventeen-year-old's moral simplicity and fierce dogmatic conviction: 'That moment will never come. The moment to give yourself to your art is now'. (pp. 356-7)

As in the exchange with his mother, Nirmalya's puritanism is ironised – he is a 16-year-old without 'real anxieties'; he is 'pure hearted but naïve' – but it is not, to return to McKeon's distinction, satirised or dismissed. Qualified by its context, his puritanism retains a vestigial power to unsettle Shyamji: just a little bit at the time of the conversation, and more disturbingly when – years later, facing his death – he remembers it.

A prominent structure in the novel, which gives shape to and articulates the characters' contradictory desires, is the chiasmus.[14] Both of the novel's epigraphs, for instance, are chiastic. The first, an extract from Buddhadeva Bose's 1944 poem 'Transformation', contains the lines, 'Free the eternal in the

unfading forgiveness of the moment / make the momentary eternal'.[15] The second, a quotation from Heraclitus, reads, 'The mortals become immortal, the immortals mortal'. Comparing *The Immortals* to Mann's *Buddenbrooks* helps make the chiastic structure of Chaudhuri's novel visible. In *Buddenbrooks*, the wealth of a bourgeois family, accumulated through trade, dissipates through the figure of Hanno, the youngest heir, when he develops a single-minded – and ruinously expensive – passion for music. In this plot, mercantile wealth finds its end in the pursuit of the arts, both in the sense of its terminus – the family fortune is lost – and in terms of its quasi-spiritual telos: to what purpose was the fortune accumulated, if not for this? Nirmalya is the Hanno-figure – an aspiring philosopher, a would-be bohemian, and finally a devotee of the raga – postures which are only possible in the context of his family's wealth, but which cannot reproduce or protect that wealth for further generations.[16] Crucially, however, in *The Immortals*, this is only half the plot, as is implied by the Heraclitus quotation. While on the one hand we see the 'mortals' – the Senguptas, the merchants – become 'immortal', ambitious for the higher (but less remunerative) gifts, we also see the 'immortals' – the gharana, the Lal family – become 'mortal', ambitious for material wealth, a different kind of transcendence. Devotion at Lakshmi's idol does not just give way to the pull of her sister; Saraswati's gifts themselves can be capitalised, put in the service of Lakshmi. Sometimes these two trajectories are experienced by the same person as a paradox. Mallika, who has experienced hardship in childhood, comes to see the security Apurva represents – and which she in turn can provide to Nirmalya – as indispensable, at the same time that she must curtail her musical ambitions to inhabit it. 'What was it about her talent', she asks herself, forming a loose chiasmus of her own, 'that made it meaningless without the happiness she had, and had also always made the happiness incomplete?' (pp. 207-8).

Aspects of this story are told in a number of Chaudhuri's writings, in different literary forms. An early poem, 'Afternoon Raag' (1989), describes a music lesson given by 'the music-teacher' to 'my mother' and is dedicated to Jaipurwale. This was reprinted as a prologue to the novel *Afternoon Raag*

(1993), which is dedicated to pandit's memory. Here, the narrator intersperses scenes of student life in England with memories of Bombay, and his relationship with his music teacher. Another fictionalised rendition of this plot is the short story 'White Lies', first published in *Granta* in 2001. This is perhaps the nearest thing to a preliminary sketch for *The Immortals*, published eight years later. His 2017 *Friend of My Youth* describes a writer, 'Amit Chaudhuri', returning to the Bombay of his childhood to promote a new novel set in the city with the title *The Immortals*. Chaudhuri would describe the music teacher–pupil relationship again in his 2022 non-fiction book *Finding the Raga: An Improvisation on Indian Music*. Indeed, alongside his work as a writer, Chaudhuri has maintained a parallel career as a musician in the North Indian classical tradition.[17] What is unusual about *The Immortals* within Chaudhuri's work is its form and scope. It is around twice as long as the longest of his other works and covers a span of around a decade, rather than a day (as in the case of *Odysseus Abroad*), a trip (*Friend of My Youth*, *Sojourn*), or a summer (*A Strange and Sublime Address, A New World*). Chronologically central – the fifth of eight novels written to date – it was published when its author was 46. 'This is a proper novel I think', the author says of *The Immortals* in Chaudhuri's auto-fictional *Friend of My Youth*: 'It took me a while, but I think I've *finally* learned how to write novels'.[18]

Chaudhuri has consistently described his development as an artist as beginning with music, turning to poetry on his return to Bombay, and only afterwards, somewhat pragmatically, moving towards novels. 'I began to write novels by accident', he has said in an interview:

> I began as a poet, and found that my poetic impulses needed the space of something larger, so they express themselves best in a more architectural space where I could talk about lives, and spaces, and all kinds of things interacting with each other. At the same time there is a poetic impulse, in which I want to let things remain unsaid, or not finish things completely, so maybe that goes against the grain of what the novel should be all about.[19]

He has also described the external commercial pressures that pushed him towards the novel as a medium. 'The rules of publishing we were being discreetly instructed in', he has said, were 'that you produce a novel every two or three years, your backlist has a fresh life and then you produce another novel; and everything you think, see or do has to be channelled into the novel'.[20] Chaudhuri would later describe the decade prior to the publication of *The Immortals* – the decade of its composition – as one in which he felt increasingly impatient and uneasy with these demands, experimenting with 'criticism and essays and short stories and … music'.[21] There must have been a degree of self-conflict – 'I feel a surge of bile against a genre that has squatted on a writer's life for two decades'– in the fact that, alongside this, he would return, periodically, to work on *The Immortals*.[22] Unsurprisingly, then, just as Chaudhuri's fictions gradually swell from the episodic, fragmentary *A Strange and Sublime Address* (a novella published with a sequence of stories in 1991), so, after *The Immortals*, they taper again. His 2022 novel *Sojourn* comprises a series of short fragments – sequential rather than plotted – transposed from the author's brief residency in Berlin. It is less than 20,000 words long.

As a novel about music, *The Immortals* inevitably poses questions about the representational capacities of the two art forms. This is particularly true given that, in his critical writing, Chaudhuri has tended to contrast North Indian classical music (the raga or *khayal*) with the realist novel as two opposed ways of relating to the world. In these texts, the raga is commonly used to exemplify the modernist art object. In *Finding the Raga*, for instance, he emphasises that the *raag* is a constituent, phenomenal part of the world's soundscape, rather than a second-order representation of another sound or mood.[23] Second-order representation, in contradistinction, would be the purpose of the realist novel. Secondly, Chaudhuri insists, the raga is not an expression of human subjectivity, comprehension, or rationalisation. He understands its 'impersonality' in the same way that he understands Eliot's concept of the impersonal. It constitutes not an expression of 'bourgeois' (self-)comprehension, but rather an 'act of attention'.[24] Indeed, Chaudhuri sees these two paradigmatically 'modernist' forms – the raga and the Eliot

poem – as sharing a common ancestor, the Sanskrit concept of *ekgrachitta* ('the consciousness focused on attention') that comes into English via Charles Wilkins's 1784 translation of the *Bhagvat-Geeta*.[25] Again, this is set in contradistinction to the realism of the nineteenth century novel. 'The rise of realism in the nineteenth century', he argues, was precisely a rejection of this interest in 'non-subjective attention', a rearguard, 'middle class' assertion that 'the imagination's purpose is responsible and representational'.[26] By his own time, fashionable novels in the realist tradition eschewed lyricism in favour of 'entrepreneurial vigour': these were 'state-of-the-nation, multicultural, possibly compendious' books that would 'flourish' in 'Thatcher's Britain' and the 'literary culture of the Blair years'. 'The Indian novel in English', of the kind that was popular when he first wrote, 'became a major entrepreneurial form in the run-up to, and aftermath of, globalization', he claimed.[27] In Chaudhuri's account, novelistic realism constitutes an act of bourgeois, bureaucratic domination over an unbroken if underground stream running from Romanticism to modernism.

The raga and the realist novel also have a fundamentally different relationship with time. In Chaudhuri's writing, music, and specifically the non-representational *khayal* or *raag*, is often discussed as a pure example of aesthetic experience which can lead to a bliss or happiness (*ananda*) that plays with, disrupts, or suspends, our experience of consciousness and temporality.[28] In the epigraph to *Finding the Raga*, Kirshori Amonkar speaks of 'art or the shastras' as the privileged means by which we obtain *ananda*, a place in which 'our life returns to us' and we are able to 'return to where we came from'.[29] A key word in Chaudhuri's critical writing is 'absorption', that process by which – in dilatory aesthetic contemplation – sequential, human-centred consciousness is suspended. We might be tempted to understand the Bosu epigraph in this way: in which the eternal (*chironto*) and the momentary (*kkonika*) merge and provide a portal to one another. The novel, by contrast, at least in its conventional, nineteenth century form, takes place in the 'preterite, the simple past tense' (Chaudhuri is paraphrasing here from Barthes's *Writing Degree Zero*). It is only in the novel, he writes, that temporal change is a 'significant subject'.

Yet novelistic narration, at least before modernism, tended to supress what Barthes called the 'trembling of existence' in favour of the 'assurance that the action is over and has been turned into, and domesticated as, story'.[30]

Pankaj Mishra has written of *The Immortals* that, 'like the tanpura's sound, Chaudhuri's novel seems to exist in an eternal present', and there are elements of truth in this.[31] Like all Chaudhuri's novels, *The Immortals* eschews scenes of conflict or high drama and contains extended descriptions of domestic scenes, architecture, and furniture. It proceeds via a somewhat dilatory succession of unnumbered chapters, and the attention of the narrative wavers at times or loses itself momentarily in the apparently functional or mundane. But read in the context of Chaudhuri's other works, what stands out, rather, is its novelistic nature.[32] As we have seen, *The Immortals* is fascinated by the process of bourgeois self-comprehension. Beyond that, *The Immortals* is singularly novelistic in its presentation of time. In his early poem 'Afternoon Raag', Chaudhuri describes how:

> A raag, spacious as the mansion the rain builds, unfolds –
> and sighs, like one of the elements.
> Inside the great architecture of the raag, through the clear
> archway of notes, world without humans,
> two figures sit, each alone
> – my mother and the music teacher – enclosed by sofas
> and paintings and curios.[33]

This passage – both a description of a *raag* and a self-titled 'raag' in verse – alludes to many of Chaudhuri's ideas about the raga as an aesthetic form. Its sound is a continuous, phenomenal part of the larger world and soundscape: it 'enfolds and sighs, like one of the elements'. It is an impersonal form, not an expression of human subjectivity, a 'clear archway of notes, world without humans'. And it takes place in a kind of eternal present tense: 'two figures sit, each alone'. *The Immortals*, by contrast, unfolds in the preterite: 'Nirmalya came in busily at twenty to one' (p. 15).

If, as Mishra says, the 'eternal present' of the raga is one way of understanding *The Immortals*' title, this idea or ideal is always shadowed by a different sense of time, which is not still or circular, but moves inexorably onwards. Meenakshi Mukherjee has argued that that the realist novel paradigmatically takes place at a specific place within historical time, and is predicated by 'an awareness of history as an irrevocable process'.[34] All of this is true of *The Immortals*. The novel describes historical processes in Bombay in the 1980s, and it also describes the individual process of Nirmalya's aesthetic education and his transition from childhood to adulthood, as well as the trajectory of Shyam's middle years, his growing prosperity and premature death. The personal and the social unite in larger stories, or fears, about historical change. 'Music is leaving the house of the ustads, the maestros', an ageing singer laments (p. 243). In the auto-fictional *Friend of My Youth*, Chaudhuri describes (or imagines) an interview given in Bombay during the promotional tour for *The Immortals*. Here, he compares novels with short stories and poems. 'The poem gives you a beginning endlessly', he says, 'the poem or the short story is about the *moment*'; by contrast, the novel, and in particular the 'nineteenth-century novel', is about 'the passage of time' – 'flowering and attrition' – from 'youth to adulthood to old age to the time of death'. 'The novelist says, "The beginning is done. I must get on with it"' *Friend of My Youth*, p. 85. In *The Immortals*, temporal change, 'flowering and attrition', shadows its apparently dilatory or digressive tendencies. The novel begins in Nirmalya's childhood and ends as he leaves for university; it begins with Shyam's first encounter with Mallika and ends with her following his funeral procession through Bombay.

The Immortals is described in *Friend of My Youth* as the book in which Chaudhuri 'finally' learns to inhabit and exploit the capacities of the novel: a culminating point in his career as a novelist, the form for which he is best known. But Chaudhuri never again attempted a novel of this kind, on this scale, and his most significant academic critics have tended to ignore it. Was this experiment in novel-writing something of an anomaly or a dead end? One reason for *The Immortals*' critical neglect is that people tend to read Chaudhuri according to the terms he

himself establishes in his criticism. Saikat Majumdar, for instance, sees the 'isolated fragments of the quotidian' or the 'isolated glimpses of quotidian reality' as the meaningful unit in Chaudhuri's work, in contradistinction to 'the aesthetic canons of traditional realist narratives', which privilege sequence and causation over fragment or glimpse, hypotaxis over parataxis. Accordingly, in his reading of Chaudhuri's body of work, *The Immortals* is hardly mentioned.[35] Peter D. McDonald centres his account of Chaudhuri's 'Rabindranathean modernist poetics' on the novel Chaudhuri wrote immediately after *The Immortals*, *Odysseus Abroad* (2014).[36] What most interests McDonald is Chaudhuri's construction of 'plotless' sequences, departing even from the 'ironized' versions of the 'traditional *Bildungsroman*' that Chaudhuri found in Joyce. 'Refusing the allegorizing modes of character associated with the "Indian novel in English" – and indeed the mimetic novel as such – the narrative makes a virtue of "hovering"', McDonald writes, tracking its characters' 'pointless rambles' in the dilatory fashion of the modernist *flâneur*.[37] McDonald notes the 'novel' is itself an unsuitable generic label for the most interesting of Chaudhuri's fictional experiments.[38]

Such accounts confirm and solidify what we might call the authorised narrative about Chaudhuri's career, in which the major achievements – *A Strange and Sublime Address* and *Afternoon Raag* at the beginning of his career; *Odysseus Abroad* and *Sojourn* in more recent years – are those which most closely follow the aesthetic tenets of earlier twentieth century modernism: in English, Joyce and Woolf; in Bengali, Bibhutibhushan and Tagore. In this account, *The Immortals* might be read as a compromised or transitionary text: a decade-long grappling with a conventional and commercial form, in which the singularity of Chaudhuri's vision, his more experimental ideas and impulses, were qualified by assimilation into the established architecture of the novel form. If *The Immortals* were to feature substantially in this narrative about Chaudhuri's writing, it would perhaps be said that its completion, perhaps even its modest reception, liberated Chaudhuri into the true experiments of his later career.

But what if we were to look at it differently? What if, rather than passing over *The Immortals* or emphasising only its modernist elements, we consider its dissonance with Chaudhuri's own account of his work, and place it at the centre of his career? If we do this, a more complicated and more interesting picture of Chaudhuri's writing comes into view. This picture emphasises not the coherence but the contradictoriness of his project: a Bengali writer whose muse is Bombay; a musician best known as a writer; a poet, by temperament, who spends most of his time writing novels; one of the most prominent champions of Indian literatures not written in English, yet whose writing to date has been exclusively anglophone. In staging a conflict between ascetic ideals and bourgeois compromise and self-justification, situating the pursuit of the timeless in a narrative structure that emphasises time's passage, and being itself a treatment in a more commercial form (the anglophone novel) of what Chaudhuri saw as a purer kind of art (the raga), *The Immortals* could be read as the apotheosis of Chaudhuri's work in the novel form as well as a major statement about that form. Chaudhuri saw the novel as a product and expression of the bourgeois world. He was of that world and knew its 'calculations' from the inside. In *The Immortals*, he takes the different strata of Bombay's bourgeoisie as his subject. Whether consciously or not, the result of design or professional circumstance, the kinds of compromise or qualification which *The Immortals* enacts on the level of form are accidental neither to its genesis nor to its effect nor to its vision. It advances a view of the novel as the form which can best express – and that itself instantiates – the uneasy accommodation between money and art, matter and spirit, which constitutes bourgeois life. It may be singular in Chaudhuri's career, but it is also poignant in a singular way. I read it, not as an anomaly, but as the culmination of his work in the novel.

This is not to say that he stopped there, or that stopping there would have been desirable or even possible. Indeed, a burden of *The Immortals* is that the compromises it presents cannot in fact be sustained and inhabited eternally. Mallika Sengupta, we are told, 'was not religious; she loved life' (though, 'when she sang' as we have seen, her voice carried 'the true note of …

renunciation') (p. 118). Dying of pleurisy at the end of the novel yet still dreaming of buying a new car, we are told that Shyam felt 'very much alive', in the sense that 'life is a longing for betterment' (p. 337). The characters in *The Immortals* are searching throughout for 'life'. More intensity, more 'whirl and glitter', more beauty, more renown, more comfort. Towards the end of the novel, after Shyam's death, the city of Bombay is compared to Draupadi's sari in the story from the *Mahabharata*. After she is lost in a game of dice, Krishna takes pity on Draupadi, and, as her assailant tries to undress her, her sari keeps unspooling endlessly. Nirmalya, back in Bombay, watches a dancer performing the story. He is struck by how 'what was really a magic trick' gives a glimpse of 'the terrifying ... dependence of human beings on divine intervention' (p. 384). 'Everyone was moved', but when the lights come up they had 'fallen back into the safety of Bombay, the air-conditioned auditorium'. Bombay says 'life goes on', and promises to unspool, like the sari, endlessly (p. 346) But no air-conditioning, no sea wall, no mitigation against climate and sea can ultimately insulate us from our 'terrifying but undeniable dependenc[y]' (p. 384).

I have quoted the novel's account of a minor character on her deathbed coming to the end of her 'worldly tenancy'. It is a metaphor for life, but could also work as a metaphor for the novel. Worldly because, itself a commercial form, it is 'responsible and representational', with aspirations to the practical, ethical, and political as well as the artistic, paying sensible, 'subtly calculating' tribute at the altars of both Saraswati and Lakshmi. Tenancy because it offers a vision of the world and a way of seeing that, while it shelters us for a while, cannot be sustained permanently. 'Worldly tenancy' might also describe the themes of this particular novel, whose 'subtly calculating' characters hear the 'note' of the transcendent while their eye is drawn by the 'glitter and whirl', the city's promise of impregnability. Its great beauty, its pathos, is to do so in a form which is itself an expression of, and which catches the timbre of, this contradiction.

For those living outside the monastery, the habits of compromise and irony in the face of competing demands, of practicality

and prudent self-interest, modelled by Shyamji, Apurva, and Mallika, are necessary to learn. They belong to maturity or adulthood, to the prudent *grihastha*, the householder. Our tragedy, however, like Shyamji's, would be to never see through or beyond this: to be seduced by this worldly comfort to the point of forgetting its transitory nature; to remain perpetually self-conflicted, hedging our statements even as we express ourselves. Perhaps this is why, having written *The Immortals*, Chaudhuri never repeated the experiment. Afterwards, he pursued narrative modes more austerely consistent with the aesthetic ideals he professed. His later writings show with increasing directness his gift for polemic and experiment but give more and more slender occasion for the novelistic pleasure of pathos. Speaking of *The Immortals* in *Friend of My Youth*, the author – or his fictional avatar – looks back on the novel's conceit: 'The comedy', he says:

> comes from how Nirmalya becomes his teacher's instructor. 'You must change your life' is his baleful teenage message to Shyam Lal'. One thing I learnt while writing the book is that the novel is a form in which you can mock that message (given that Nirmalya is the one saying it) without diluting its urgency.[39]

This doubleness is indeed an affordance of the form, and it is a doubleness that can make experience between imperative and action bearable. You can inhabit this way of seeing yourself for a while, but you would not – as Chaudhuri was wise to see – want to inhabit it forever. 'The moment to give yourself to your art is now'.

Christ Church, Oxford, UK

NOTES

[1] Amit Chaudhuri, 'Two Sisters: The Attitude to the Serene Musical Deity Is a Mildly Calculating One', *The Telegraph* (Kolkata), 1 Feb. 2009; < https://www.telegraphindia.com/

opinion/two-sisters-the-attitude-to-the-serene-musical-deity-is-a-mildly-calculating-one/cid/503453> (accessed 12 Mar. 2024).

[2] W. J. Johnson, *A Dictionary of Hinduism* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 184, 291.

[3] *Bhadralok* – literally a polite or civilised (*bhadra*) person (*lok*) – refers to the genteel middle-class Bengali culture.

[4] Following the author's usage, I use Bombay and Calcutta instead of Mumbai and Kolkata.

[5] Published as *D. H. Lawrence and 'Difference'* (Oxford, 2003).

[6] Amit Chaudhuri, *The Immortals* (2009; 2023 edn.), p. 3. Further references are given in the text.

[7] Amit Chaudhuri, *Finding the Raga: An Improvisation on Indian Music* (2022), p. 17; hereafter *FR*.

[8] For all its connections to Hinduism, Chaudhuri points out that the performance of North Indian classical music has been 'dominated by Muslim ustads' (*FR*, p. 21).

[9] For a more detailed historical account, see Rajnarayan Chandarvarkar, *History, Culture, and the Indian City* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 27-8.

[10] On the history, and mythology, of land reclamation in Bombay, see Prakash, 'The City on the Sea', in *Mumbai Fables* (Princeton, NJ, 2010), pp. 75-116.

[11] As a Bengali singer trying to enter the Bombay musical scene, Mallika must master the varieties of Hindi/Urdu/Hindustani in which bhajans, ghazals, and *khayal* are sung; particularly troubling to the native Bangla speaker is the pronunciation of the vowels.

[12] Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel*, 15th anniversary edn. (Baltimore, Md., 2002), p. 332.

[13] Philip Davies, 'High Realism', in *The Victorians: The Oxford English Literary History*, vol. viii: *1830-1880* (Oxford, 2002), p. 372.

[14] Lanham defines chiasmus as 'the ABBA mirror pattern of inversion'. It sets up an 'internal dynamic that draws the parts closer together, as if the second element wanted to flip over and back over the first'. Richard Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* 2nd edn. (Berkeley, Calif., 1991), p. 33.

[15] The chiasmus is clearer in the Bengali, in which *chironton* ('the eternal') and *kkonikar* ('the moment') appear in inverse positions across the line break.

[16] Simon During's reading of the novel – one of the few scholarly accounts – sees Nirmalya something like this, entering into an elective precarity-of-the-intelligentsia in a way which both obscures and complicates a Marxian (or Gramscian) account of class relations. See his 'From the Subaltern to the Precariat', *Boundary 2*, 42 (2015), 57-84.

[17] It is also possible to compare Chaudhuri's accounts with those in his mother's own memoir: Bijoya Chaudhuri's *Sylhet Konyar Atmokotha* (Kolkata, 2004), as Sumana Roy does in her essay 'Bijoya Chaudhuri: Memoir of the Girl from Sylhet', *Life Writing*, 2/1 (2005), 163-72.

[18] Amit Chaudhuri, *Friend of My Youth* (2017; 2018 edn.), p. 84. On the autobiographical nature of *Friend of My Youth* and its relationship to a generic history of so-called autofiction (Chaudhuri cites Naipaul's *Enigma of Arrival* as a key progenitor), see his essay '*I* am Ramu' in *The Origins of Dislike* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 284-96.

[19] 'Amit Chaudhuri with Fernando Galvàn', in Susheila Nasta (ed.), *Writing Across Worlds: Contemporary Writers Talk* (Abingdon, 2004), pp. 216-28: 219.

[20] Nicholas Wroe, 'Amit Chaudhuri: I Use the Things That Real Memoirists Throw Out', *Guardian*, 14 Feb. 2015; <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/feb/14/amit-chaudhuri-i-use-real-memoirists-throw-out> (accessed 5 Aug. 2025).

[21] Ibid.

[22] *Friend of My Youth*, p. 84. See Amit Chaudhuri, 'Why I Write Novels', *N+1*, 3 Dec. 2020; <https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/why-i-write-novels/> (accessed 11 July 2025): 'In 2000, I tried to take a break from the novel . . . I remember thinking: "Why must the variety of the creative impetus I feel be accommodated by the novel alone? Certain things I want to say might be better expressed in an essay, story, poem, or even a musical composition. Why foreclose those options?"'

[23] See Chaudhuri, *Finding the Raga*, pp. 39-41.

[24] 'Impersonality: A Journey', unpublished MS, circulated for a conference on 'Aesthetic Education', p. 10. Quoted by kind permission of the author.
[25] Ibid., p. 9.
[26] Ibid., pp. 7-8.
[27] Chaudhuri, 'Why I Write Novels'.
[28] See *Finding the Raga*, where Chaudhuri gives his fullest account both of his aesthetic ideas and of the Brahmo and modernist influences that have shaped them.
[29] Kishori Amonkar (1932-2017) was one of the great classical singers of the Jaipur Gharana.
[30] Chaudhuri, 'Why I Write Novels'. Barthes's quotations are cited in the text.
[31] Pankaj Mishra, introduction to Amit Chaudhuri, *The Immortals* (2023) pp. vii-xviii: xviii.
[32] To Glyn Maxwell reviewing the book in the *LRB*, what is most prominently brought to attention is rather the 'frontier', the difference between the two representational modes: 'There's nothing like a book about music to remind a reader of the silence'. See Maxwell, 'Can't It Be Me?', *London Review of Books*, 31/7 (Apr. 2009) <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v31/n07/glyn-maxwell/can-t-it-be-me>; (accessed 5 Aug. 2025).
[33] Chaudhuri, 'Afternoon Raag' in *Sweet Shop: New and Selected Poems 1985-2023* (New York, 2023), p. 134. The poem is dated 1989 and dedicated 'To the memory of Pandit Govind Prasad Jaipurwale 1944-1988'. Quoted by kind permission of the author.
[34] Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India* (New Delhi, 1994), p. 9.
[35] Saikat Majumdar, *Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire* (New York, 2013), pp. 156-8, and see pp. 135-68.
[36] Peter D. McDonald, *Artefacts of Writing: Ideas of the State and Communities of Letters from Matthew Arnold to Xu Bing* (Oxford, 2017), p. 255.
[37] Ibid., p. 259.
[38] Ibid., p. 255.
[39] Chaudhuri, *Friend of My Youth*, pp. 89-90.

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