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## Mother-Son Relationship in Amit Chaudhuri's *The Immortals*

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### **Abstract:**

Amit Chaudhuri in his fifth novel *The Immortals* (2009) explores the theme of mother-son relationship, quest for identity and cultural conflicts. The story revolves around the three major characters, the protagonist Nirmalya Sengupta, his mother Mallika and his music teacher Shyam Lal. Nirmalya, a college going teen age son of a rich corporate father, is in a search of his identity as a classical singer. Instead of putting on costly garments and spending his time in attending parties of his parents, we find him in a faded jeans and 'kurta'. As he is a devotee of Indian classical music, he is very intent on defending this tradition against the threat of commercialism. He doesn't hesitate to condemn his mother, Mallika for drifting towards commercialism and neglecting art. While doing his graduation, he tries to learn classical singing and establish his identity as a classical singer. Nirmalya's music teacher, Shyam Lal who has inherited classical singing from his father Ram Lal, has squandered his artistic inheritance by tutoring children and wives of wealthy persons and dreams to become wealthy like them. Nirmalya claims that his Guru Shyamji has sold his soul by straddling the two different worlds of singing- classical music versus popular music. Mallika, a student of Shyam Lal who wants to establish her identity as a popular classical singer tries very hard to preserve her identity as an artist as well as her identity as a mother and a wife. The objective of this paper is to explore the theme of mother son relationship between the protagonist, Nirmalya and his beloved mother, Mallika.

**Keywords: identity, recognition, protagonist, corporate.**

Amit Chaudhuri's novels are generally set in Calcutta (Kolkata) and Bombay (Mumbai), the cosmopolitans where different cultures cohabit and influence the novelist. His fifth novel *The Immortals* (2009) is a story of two families: one rich, enjoying luxuries of corporate life and the other middleclass, getting by on the old world of musical tradition.

In this novel, Chaudhuri explores the theme of mother-son relationship through the central character, Nirmalya Sengupta who is in search of an identity as a classical singer. His identity is influenced by the affluence of his corporate father. When we meet him for the first time he is seven years old school boy. His mother Mallika Sengupta takes every care of her only son. She instructs the man servant, John to shut the windows of his bedroom in anticipation of his arrival from school. Though Mallika, a talented singer, is trying to pursue her career as a singer and busy in getting training under renowned teachers like Moti Lal and Shyam Lal to establish herself as a celebrated singer, she tries to maintain her identity as a good wife of a corporate husband and a loving mother. In her attempt to perverse her dual identity her relationship with her only son is strained. While commenting on her dual identity Chaudhuri observes:

The music was a constant trickle in her life, not allowed to disturb her routine; in fact, the routine went on, and now and then paused decorously to make time for the music, at which point it was consigned to someone else's hands- John, or the cook; but it wasn't allowed to stop. She never consented to losing her grip on it, to handing the reins to someone else, except temporarily (15).

Mallika very skillfully plays the double role and doesn't allow her quest for singing to hamper her duty as a house wife and a mother. Under her care and attention, Nirmalya grows by indirectly learning singing from various teachers that visit their house to teach his mother singing.

At Shyamji's house Mallika meets Asha Bhosale. There Shyamji praises Mallika for her beautiful voice and urges Asha to listen to her one day. Asha is pleased but Mallika feels jealous, irritated and angry because Asha and Lata these two sisters ruled the Hindi film music world. She compares herself to Asha who lives simple life like an ordinary working person wearing a plain printed sari. On the contrary Mallika, as a wife of a successful corporate executive, enjoys affluent and luxurious happy life wearing costly colourful saris. She doesn't want to live like Asha and sacrifice pleasures of her family life. Yet she is not happy so far as her career as a singer is concerned. Her talent is wasted resulting into incomplete happiness. There is no development in Mallika's identity as a celebrated singer. L. R. Shukla doesn't think of recording her first disc of songs. Her career "as a singer was there – exactly where it had been ten years ago --- she still sang, with the purposelessness and dedication of something between a nun and a house wife" (211). One more factor that affects the identity of Mallika is the death of L. R. Shukla. Mallika's dream of becoming celebrated

singer by recording her songs into disc and releasing it shatters. Mallika accepts her fate saying that she is now free of burden of making her disc. But in reality she wants recognition of her talent. Chaudhuri analyzes her mind as:

Mallika had wanted recognition, that pure, woebegone desire for a reward for her gift had accompanied her life from the start but never overwhelmed it; but hadn't wanted to dirty her hands in the music world; she had wanted to preserve the prestige of being, at once, an artist and the wife of a successful executive. She knew, with an uncomplicated honesty, what her worth was; to what extent could she compromise or to which level stoop if others pretended not to? She kept her distance; remaining busy all the time, not a moment's hiatus, busy with the music, busy with the household, busy with Nirmalya's life and Mr. Sengupta's. (286)

Mallika wants to preserve her identity as an artist as well as a good mother and the wife of a successful executive. She also knows her abilities as well as limits and accordingly makes herself busy in her music, household, in Nirmalya's and her husband's life.

Mallika, after getting rid of her old music teacher, Moti Lal and having training under series of teachers, appoints Shyam Lal, the son of late Pandit Ram Lal as her new music teacher. Nirmalya who has finished his school finals is now fifteen years old. He is attracted towards his mother's new music teacher Shyamji. Shyamji is also genuinely interested in the boy. After final exams, Nirmalya decides to change his identity. He allows shadowy goatee under his chin and his hair to grow. Once when he was in a school, he had been punished for allowing to grow his hair. As his exams are over, now he is not answerable to anybody. He gives up attending his parent's parties and putting on costly new garments and prefers simple old clothes like faded 'kurta' and jeans. That is why when he is introduced to Shyamji by his mother, he looked untidy. Mallika is much worried to notice this change in Nirmalya's personality. But Shyamji in the very first meeting invites Nirmalya to listen his song: Nirmalya accepts the invitation and seats on a sofa and listens to Shyamji. In fact it was the first song Shyamji taught to his mother. Though Nirmalya doesn't understand all the words, the song has created interest in him about singing and the teacher, Shyamji. He starts thinking about the meaning of the words in the song and after two days asks his mother meaning of some of the words he doesn't understand. This first meeting between Nirmalya and Shyamji leads to their future relationship as a student and a teacher.

Day by day Nirmalya's liking for singing and Shyamji continues. He expresses his desire to learn classical singing under Shyamji and Shyamji, though under confusion, accepts Nirmalya as his student. As Nirmalya develops interest in classical music, he has formed all

kinds of ideas about art and artists. He thinks that Shyamji treats teaching singing as a job and not as an art. "Shyamji fitted neither the model of eastern artist, nor that of the Western musician. The Eastern artist was part of religious figure, the Western part rebel; and Shyamji seemed to be neither. (99)

Though Shyamji doesn't practice classical singing, he has inherited and learnt it from his father Pandit Ram Lal. Instead of singing ghazals and bhajans, Nirmalya wants to sing 'Shastriya Sangeet' (classical music). He expresses his desire to learn it from Shyamji. When Shyamji tells about it to Mallika, his face turns into confusion. He further remarks that as 'Shastriya Sangeet' is difficult to learn, no one wants to learn it. Most of the young men and women in Thacker Towers and its surrounding buildings where Nirmalya lived want to learn ghazals, love songs and bhajans. Shyamji willingly accepts them because not only they pay more but also they have opened new gateway into the type of life he thinks to lead and drift away from 'Shastriya Sangeet' which has given little to him and his father. This shift can lead him to establish his identity as a rich person like the Senguptas. Yet, as Nirmalya is son of the Senguptas and he loves him, Shyamji accepts him as his student. But their relationship was not like traditional 'guru-shishya' relationship because they don't go through the ritual, "the guru tying the nada, the thread, round the shishya's wrist, and the shishya giving his teacher guru-dakshina, maybe a couple of hundred rupees and box of sweets". (109)

As Mallika succeeds in persuading Shyamji to accept her son as his student, Nirmalya begins to practice the vocal exercises his teacher Shyamji has given to him. But unfortunately his mother's practice is affected by the business parties of his corporate father. Nirmalya scolds his mother neglecting singing practice. He says, " 'Ma, you are not practicing at all'!... 'you are spending too much time at these stupid parties' "(116). Nirmalya has friendly relations with his parents. He goes with them for parties but doesn't mix with them. Instead he likes wandering in the lobbies in his untidy clothes. Mallika was caught between her husband's business and her son's changed personality and his urge for singing. While analyzing her mind, Chaudhuri remarks:

She was torn, at these moments, between two influences: her husband, whose wisdom she was guided by, and who, in a way, shaped her life, even her life as an artist and her son, who'd temporarily assume the role of a guru, always expecting more from her-not more maternal love, but devotion to her art- than she could give, and who seemed to have quite different ideas (he voiced them urgently) from his father about the role singing should play in her existence. (117)

Mallika sacrifices her identity as a singer because she has given more importance to her identity as a mother of an adolescent son and the Managing Director's wife. Besides she doesn't like to deal with whims of Shukla and his world. As a result, she almost hides herself behind her husband. At the same time she feels irritated when she listens to Lata and Asha on radio- "the sisters' high-pitched voices, almost indistinguishable from one another, everywhere. This wasn't the India she'd grown up in; India had been transformed into an island, with only one radio station, and she had to listen to the same singers again and again" (Chaudhuri 135). Mallika feels jealous of Lata and Asha. She thinks that Lata in a white sari looks like a hermit. She is not also a goddess Saraswati as her admirers praise her. She is a lonely woman and is not close to anyone. Asha after desertion by her husband becomes associated with music director. They are successful as singers but have sacrificed their family life. Though Mallika doesn't prove herself as a singer, she is a successful as a mother and a housewife and is very happy with her husband and son. She is unwilling to sacrifice her happy family life to fulfill her ambition and establish her identity as a singer.

Though Mallika is happy in playing her role as a mother and a wife, Nirmalya, who becomes seventeen years old, is not happy with his father's affluent world and the life he is leading. He doesn't feel at home at Thacker Towers. He changes his childhood ideas of living and gets new ones. While commenting on Nirmalya's changed identity the narrator observes:

As he began to shade the meanings he'd grown up with, he busily assigned new ones. He fell almost belligerently in love with an idea, to do with an immemorial sense of his country; and music was indispensable to it. The raga contained the land within it – its seasons, its times of day, its birdcall, its clouds and heat – it gave him an ideal, magical sense of the country; it was a fiction, he fell in love with. (195)

Music became important part of Nirmalya's life. Other things, like his father's company, parties in costly hotels, luxurious flats and other affluences of his father's job have no importance in his life. He comes to the conclusion that material pleasure is useless and nothing in this world is true enough. Only the art, the classical music is true. He wants to excel in it and establish himself as a classical singer. But Shyamji's busy schedule and preference for light form of music is the obstacle to fulfill his ambition. As a result, he becomes frustrated and unhappy. He thinks to go to Himalaya for solace and thus expresses his feelings in front of his mother and her friend Nayana Niyogi who is surprised to listen his desire because Nirmalya has everything to his disposal. She asks, "Why, Nirmalya? What can you possibly lack? You have everything'." (Chaudhuri 199). By everything, she means the material pleasures like the luxurious flats to live in, costly car for travelling, parties in

costly hotels, servants to attend him in the house, and so on. She is unaware of his ambition, his anxieties and his changed identity. He wants nothing but the excellence in classical music. And on the contrary his teacher is after material pleasures. So Nirmalya decides to go to Himalaya where he will get solution to his problem.

One more change in Nirmalya's personality strains the mother-son relationship. Though Nirmalya "has inherited his mother's love of music, he finds his mind turning to Philosophy" (Lively 2). Mallika is much worried about her son's future and career. When she asks him about his future plans and career, he tells her that he wants to go to England to get his degree of Philosophy from Kings College London. Though Apurva Sengupta is not happy with his son's decision of not joining his father's profession that draws lot of money, he makes financial provisions to send Nirmalya to England. Nirmalya completes the formalities of the admission process and departs to London. On phone he tells his mother to tell Shyamji he should be more careful. Shyamji accepts Nirmalya as his critic and says, " 'He is my biggest critic. He keeps a stern eye on me' " (356). It was true that Nirmalya has been criticizing Shyamji for not singing classical songs and devoting to the true art. He almost scolds Shyamji as " 'Why don't you sing more classical? ... Why are bhajans and ghazals sung in this cheap way these days?' " (356). To such questions Shyamji gives practical answer to Nirmalya " ' Baba, you cannot practice an 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' " (357).

As Shyamji neglects his health and pays more attention to earn more money, he suffers heart attack and dies in hospital. Mallika attends funeral and conveys the bad news to Nirmalya. Nirmalya comes back to India after three months. He is without teacher. Shyamji's death creates hallow in his mind. He is confused and doesn't know where to go. He goes back to London to pursue his degree. He receives letter from his father which reveals that Pyarelal, his companion and supporter after his teacher's death, contracts jaundice due to his wound which has not been healed. It was another shock to Nirmalya. He becomes unhappy and is unable to know the exact reason behind his melancholy mood. While analyzing Nirmalya's mind the narrator observes:

Nirmalya sighed as he refolded the aerogramme. He sat and looked strait in front of him. Where did this sudden melancholy come from? Was it Pyarelal, or the light outside, or the way in which Shyamji had gone abruptly? Or was it something without history, a dull, buzzing ache which had first announced itself to him during his

transformation from a child into a young man, and which had no present and immediate cause. (Chaudhuri 405)

Mallika is worried about her son's physical as well as mental health. There is murmur in his chest and concern about his teachers in his heart. She is also not happy with the name Nirmalya given by her mother. It means 'an offering to the gods. Mallika neither intends to offer her son to gods nor allows them to interfere with her happy life. She tries to keep her son as happy as she can. She is a very loving and responsible mother who takes every care of her son. The son also is equally concerned about his mother's career as a celebrated singer. As a result the strained mother-son relationship changes into healthy one.

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